UNDERSTANDING LUTHER

A Guide to His Life, Theology and Writings

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PREFACE

Why Understanding Luther Matters

Martin Luther stands among the most significant figures in the history of the Christian Church. His name is inseparably associated with the Protestant Reformation, the recovery of the doctrine of justification by faith, the translation of the Scriptures into the language of ordinary people, and the great controversy concerning the authority of the Church and the authority of the Word of God.

Yet Luther is frequently better known by reputation than by his actual writings.

Statements attributed to him are repeated without their original context; doctrines developed by later generations are sometimes read back into his works; and the name Lutheran can easily be treated as though everything subsequently taught under that description represented precisely what Martin Luther himself believed.

There is therefore considerable value in returning to Luther's own writings.

This book has been prepared to help the reader do that.

It is not intended primarily as another biography of Martin Luther. Neither is it an attempt to defend everything Luther said or did. Luther was a man, not an inspired apostle, and his writings must be judged by the same standard by which the teaching of every Christian

minister and theologian must ultimately be judged: the Holy Scriptures.

The purpose of this book is rather to provide the historical and theological background necessary for reading Luther intelligently and fairly.

Reading Luther in His Own Setting

Luther did not write a systematic theology in which all his beliefs were arranged into a single, carefully ordered account. Much of what he wrote arose out of particular circumstances.

He lectured upon Scripture. He preached. He wrote letters. He responded to opponents. He addressed controversies as they arose. He wrote pastoral works for ordinary Christians and polemical works against those whose teaching he believed threatened the Gospel.

This must be remembered when reading him.

A statement written in the heat of controversy cannot always be understood properly when removed from the controversy that produced it. Likewise, Luther's thought developed during the course of his life. The young Augustinian monk struggling with the question of righteousness must not simply be treated as though he already possessed every conviction expressed by the mature Reformer.

Historical setting therefore matters.

But history alone is insufficient. To understand Luther we must also understand the theological questions with which he was wrestling.

What is the condition of man after the Fall?

Can fallen man turn himself towards God?

What is the relationship between grace and the human will?

How is a sinner justified before God?

What authority belongs to Scripture?

What is the relationship between faith and works?

What did Luther mean by distinguishing Law from Gospel?

And what did he mean when he spoke of the bondage of man's will?

These were not abstract questions for Luther. They concerned the very nature of the Gospel.

The Companion Volume to ***The Bondage of the Will***

A particular reason for preparing this book arose from the work undertaken in producing a new edition of Martin Luther's The Bondage of the Will. During the preparation of that volume it became increasingly apparent that the modern reader may benefit from more than a clear and accessible text of Luther's work. The historical controversy, theological terminology, biblical arguments and circumstances in which Luther wrote all require some explanation if his argument is to be properly understood.

Understanding Luther has therefore been prepared as a companion volume to that edition of The Bondage of the Will.

It is not intended to replace Luther's work or to provide a running commentary upon every paragraph. Its purpose is to equip the reader to approach Luther's own words with a better understanding of the man, the age in which he lived, the theological questions he faced, and the biblical doctrines for which he contended.

The Bondage of the Will will consequently occupy an important place in this book. We shall consider the controversy with Desiderius Erasmus, the question of free will, the condition of fallen man, divine sovereignty, grace,

election, and the principal passages of Scripture upon which Luther based his arguments.

But the purpose of Understanding Luther is wider still. The Bondage of the Will provides an entrance into Luther's thought; from there we shall consider his life, the development of the Reformation, his understanding of Scripture, justification by faith, Law and Gospel, Christian liberty, and a selection of his other principal writings.

In this sense the two volumes are intended to be read together. The Bondage of the Will allows Luther to speak for himself; Understanding Luther seeks to provide the reader with the historical and theological framework necessary to understand what he is saying.It is also a demanding book.

Luther assumes knowledge that many modern readers no longer possess. He moves through biblical passages, theological arguments and controversies familiar to his original readers but often unfamiliar today. His language can also be forceful, particularly when answering an opponent.

A reader can therefore encounter Luther's words without necessarily understanding Luther's argument.

One purpose of Understanding Luther is to bridge that gap.

We shall examine the controversy with Erasmus, the doctrines underlying it, the Scriptures employed by Luther, and the conclusions he draws from them. But we shall not stop with The Bondage of the Will. That work will serve as a doorway into the wider theology and writings of Martin Luther.

Neither Hero Worship nor Condemnation

There are two equally unhelpful ways of approaching a figure such as Luther.

The first is to make him a Protestant hero whose words are treated almost as though they were beyond criticism.

The second is to judge his entire life and theological contribution solely by his errors, excesses or some of the deeply objectionable things he wrote, particularly in his later years.

Neither approach is adequate.

Luther should be allowed to speak for himself. Where he recovered and clearly proclaimed biblical truth, that truth should be recognised. Where his conclusions require correction, they should be examined by Scripture. Where his conduct or language was wrong, it should not be excused merely because of his importance to the Reformation.

The principle is straightforward:

> **Luther is to be read, understood and tested—not idolised and not dismissed.**

That principle will govern this book.

Returning to the Scriptures

Ultimately, the value of studying Luther does not lie merely in understanding an important historical figure.

The controversies of the sixteenth century continually drive us back to questions that remain important: the authority of Scripture, the condition of fallen man, the nature of saving grace, justification before God, the work of Christ and the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Luther himself must never become the final authority upon these questions.

The purpose of understanding Luther is therefore not simply that we might become better informed about the Reformation. It is that, having understood the questions Luther raised and the answers he gave, we might return

again to the Scriptures and examine these things for ourselves.

That is the purpose of this book.

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

How to Read Martin Luther

To understand Martin Luther, it is not enough simply to collect quotations from his writings. Luther wrote and taught over a long and eventful period, during which he passed from being an Augustinian monk and university lecturer to becoming one of the principal figures of the Protestant Reformation. His writings arose from many different circumstances and were addressed to very different audiences.

Some were lectures upon books of the Bible. Others were sermons preached to congregations. Some were pastoral works intended to instruct ordinary Christians. Others were written in the midst of fierce theological controversy. There are letters, catechisms, treatises, commentaries, disputations and polemical works.

Consequently, the first principle in reading Luther is simple:

> **We should ask not only what Luther said, but when he said it, why he said it, to whom he was speaking, and what question he was attempting to answer.**

Without this, Luther can easily be misunderstood.

Luther Was Not a Systematic Theologian

Luther never produced a complete systematic theology comparable to those produced by some later Protestant theologians. We cannot therefore turn to a single volume in which he arranged every doctrine into a finished and carefully defined system.

His theology must instead be gathered from his biblical lectures, sermons, treatises, correspondence and controversial writings.

This does not mean that Luther's theology lacked coherence. Certain convictions appear repeatedly throughout his mature writings: the authority of Scripture, the seriousness of the Fall,

man's inability to justify himself before God, the necessity of divine grace, justification through faith, the sufficiency of Christ, and the distinction between Law and Gospel.

Nevertheless, Luther usually discussed these doctrines because some particular biblical passage, pastoral concern or controversy had brought them before him.

This is particularly evident in The Bondage of the Will. Luther was not attempting to write a complete doctrine of salvation. He was answering Erasmus on a specific question: Does fallen man possess a free will by which he can turn himself towards God and contribute to his salvation?

Understanding that question is essential to understanding Luther's answer.

The Date of a Writing Matters

Luther's writings must also be read chronologically.

The Luther of 1510 was not in precisely the same theological position as the Luther of 1525. His break with the theology and authority of medieval Rome did not occur in a single moment. His understanding developed as he studied Scripture, lectured at Wittenberg, encountered opposition and was forced to examine more carefully the consequences of what he had begun to teach.

This means that an early statement should not automatically be treated as Luther's final position upon a subject.

The Ninety-Five Theses of 1517 provide an obvious example. They are enormously important historically, but they should not be read as though they were a complete statement of mature Protestant theology. Luther was still working within a world of thought from which he would subsequently move considerably further.

By 1520 his challenge to Rome had become much more fundamental. By 1521 he had stood before the Diet of Worms. By 1525, when The Bondage of the Will appeared, the theological lines between Luther and his opponents had become considerably clearer.

Later still, Luther would become involved in controversies with other Reformers concerning the Lord's Supper and other doctrines.

When reading Luther, therefore, we should always ask:

When was this written?

That one question can prevent many misunderstandings.

Read the Work Before the Quotation

Luther possessed a remarkable ability to express himself forcefully. Consequently, individual sentences from his works are frequently quoted.

But memorable quotations can become misleading when separated from the argument in which they occur.

This is particularly dangerous with controversial writings.

Luther could employ exaggeration, irony, ridicule and extremely forceful language when attacking an argument he regarded as dangerous. A sentence taken from such a passage and presented without explanation may give a distorted impression of his meaning.

The safest method is therefore to move from the whole to the part.

First establish the subject of the work. Then determine the argument of the section. Only then should an individual statement be interpreted.

This principle will be followed throughout Understanding Luther. Where particular statements are important, we shall seek to understand them within the argument Luther was making rather than treating isolated quotations as though they constituted his entire position.

Distinguish Luther from Lutheranism

Another important distinction must be made between Martin Luther and Lutheranism.

The Lutheran churches and confessional documents that developed during and after Luther's lifetime naturally owe an enormous debt to him. Nevertheless, a theological tradition that develops around a man's teaching should not simply be identified with the man himself.

Later theologians systematised, defined and sometimes developed questions that Luther had treated under different circumstances.

Consequently, when this book asks, "What did Luther believe?", our first concern will be Luther's own writings.

Later Lutheran confessions and theologians may help us understand his influence and legacy, and we shall consider them in their proper place. But they should not be permitted to speak retrospectively for Luther where Luther can speak for himself.

The same caution applies when Luther is viewed from within the Reformed tradition. Later Reformed theologians may agree profoundly with Luther at some points and disagree with him at others. Their theological formulations should not automatically be attributed to Luther merely because they share his opposition to Rome or his emphasis upon sovereign grace.

Luther Must Be Tested by Scripture

There is a still more important distinction.

Understanding what Luther believed is not the same thing as demonstrating that Luther was correct.

The Protestant Reformation challenged the claim that ecclesiastical authority could stand above the Word of God. It would therefore be strangely inconsistent to replace one unquestionable human authority with another.

Luther himself was not an apostle, and his writings are not Scripture.

Where Luther's teaching accurately expresses biblical truth, it should be received because that truth is taught in Scripture—not merely because Luther taught it.

Where his interpretation is questionable, it must be examined.

Where he was wrong, he should be corrected.

And where his conduct or language was indefensible, historical importance should not be used to excuse it.

The reader is therefore encouraged throughout this book to keep the Bible open.

The question is not finally:

What does Luther say?

but:

What do the Scriptures teach, and does Luther's argument faithfully express their teaching?

Read Luther Historically, Theologically and Biblically

Three perspectives will therefore guide our study.

Historically, we shall ask what was happening when Luther wrote, whom he was addressing, and what controversy or circumstance produced the work.

Theologically, we shall ask what doctrine was at issue and how

Luther's argument relates to his wider understanding of God, man, sin, grace, Christ and salvation.

Biblically, we shall examine the Scriptures upon which Luther relied and consider whether the conclusions he drew from them are warranted.

This approach is especially important when we come to The Bondage of the Will. The controversy between Luther and Erasmus cannot properly be understood merely as a sixteenth-century dispute between two famous men. It raises questions concerning human nature, divine grace, God's foreknowledge, election, responsibility and salvation which arise directly from the interpretation of Scripture.

Let Luther Speak

The purpose of a guide such as this is not to prevent the reader from having to read Luther.

It is precisely the opposite.

A good guide should eventually become unnecessary. It should provide sufficient historical and theological orientation for the reader to approach the original writer with greater understanding.

That is the purpose of Understanding Luther.

We shall begin with the world in which Luther was born, follow the events that brought him into conflict with Rome, examine the doctrines that became central to his theology, and then turn particularly to the controversy that produced The Bondage of the Will.

Throughout, our aim will remain the same:

Let Luther speak for himself; understand him in his own setting; and test what he says by the Word of God.

THE MAKING OF MARTIN LUTHER

Chapter 1

The World into Which Luther Was Born

Martin Luther was born on 10 November 1483 at Eisleben in Saxony, within the Holy Roman Empire. To understand the man he became, and particularly the controversy that eventually surrounded him, we must first understand something of the world into which he

was born.

It was a world very different from our own, but it was also a world undergoing profound change.

The medieval order had not disappeared. The Roman Church exercised enormous religious authority throughout Western Europe. The pope stood at the head of an extensive ecclesiastical structure; monasteries and religious houses were widespread; universities taught theology largely according to established scholastic traditions; and the sacramental ministry of the Church accompanied men and women from baptism to burial.

Yet beneath this apparent stability, powerful forces were already at work.

The Renaissance had encouraged renewed interest in ancient texts. Humanist scholars were calling for a return to original sources. The invention and rapid development of printing had transformed the means by which ideas could be communicated. Political rulers were increasingly conscious of their own authority, while resentment concerning ecclesiastical wealth and abuses was widespread.

Luther did not create all these conditions.

He was born into them.

Christendom and the Medieval Church

For most people in late fifteenth-century Europe, Christianity was not merely one aspect of life among many. Religion permeated society.

The calendar was ordered by Christian festivals. Churches dominated towns and villages. Baptism, marriage, confession, the Mass and burial were woven into ordinary existence. Questions concerning salvation, judgment, heaven, hell and purgatory possessed an immediacy that can be difficult for a modern secular reader to appreciate.

The Western Church also possessed immense institutional power.

Its authority extended far beyond the local parish. Bishops governed dioceses; religious orders maintained monasteries and schools; universities trained clergy and theologians; canon law regulated ecclesiastical affairs; and the papacy claimed a unique authority within the universal Church.

For Luther, therefore, questioning established teaching would eventually mean far more than disagreeing with the minister of a local congregation. It would bring him into conflict with an entire system of ecclesiastical authority.

This did not happen at once.

Luther was born into this world and initially accepted its fundamental assumptions. He was baptised within it, educated within it, entered a monastery within it and was ordained to its priesthood.

The Reformer emerged from within the medieval Church.

The Question of Salvation

At the centre of medieval religion stood the question of man's relationship with God.

The Church taught an elaborate sacramental system in which divine grace was communicated through appointed means. Baptism, penance, the Eucharist and the other sacraments formed part of the Christian's life within the Church.

Sin after baptism required repentance and confession. Penance was associated with satisfaction, and temporal punishment for sin became connected with the doctrine of indulgences. Purgatory was understood as a state of purification after death for those who died in grace but still required cleansing from the temporal consequences of sin.

For ordinary Christians these teachings were not merely academic doctrines. They affected how men and women thought about death and eternity.

How could a sinner stand before a holy God?

How could guilt be removed?

What must a person do to obtain forgiveness?

Could anyone know that he was accepted by God?

These questions would eventually become intensely personal for Luther.

His later doctrine of justification cannot properly be understood unless we recognise the religious world in which those questions first arose.

Scholastic Theology

The universities of Luther's day inherited a sophisticated

theological tradition commonly described as scholasticism.

Scholastic theology sought to examine Christian doctrine through careful argument, definition and logical distinction. It would be unfair simply to describe scholasticism as ignorance of Scripture. Medieval theologians used the Bible extensively, and some were formidable scholars.

Nevertheless, theology had developed within a complex intellectual structure drawing upon Scripture, Church tradition, canon law, earlier theologians and philosophical categories, particularly those associated with Aristotle.

Different schools existed within scholastic theology, and they did not agree upon every question. This is important. There was no single medieval theologian whose teaching represented everything Luther would later oppose.

Luther himself received a scholastic education and learned to argue within this intellectual world before he began to challenge important aspects of it.

His eventual criticism of scholastic theology therefore came from someone who knew the system from within.

The Papacy and Ecclesiastical Authority

Another question that would become increasingly important concerned authority.

What authority belonged to the pope?

What authority belonged to councils?

Could either err?

And what happened when ecclesiastical authority appeared to conflict with Holy Scripture?

These were not initially the questions that drove Luther into public controversy. The dispute that brought him to widespread attention concerned indulgences.

But once Luther's teaching was challenged, the deeper question became unavoidable.

If Luther believed a doctrine or practice could not be justified from Scripture, while recognised ecclesiastical authorities insisted upon it, which authority must prevail?

The controversy therefore developed from a dispute about a particular practice into a much more fundamental dispute

concerning the nature and authority of the Church itself.

Indulgences

The issue most closely associated with the beginning of the Reformation is the sale and preaching of indulgences.

An indulgence concerned the remission of temporal punishment associated with sins whose guilt had been forgiven. By Luther's time, indulgence preaching had become connected with financial contributions, and abuses surrounding the practice caused considerable concern.

The matter was particularly explosive because indulgences were connected in popular understanding with purgatory and the condition of the dead.

Johann Tetzel became the indulgence preacher most famously associated with the controversy that brought Luther into public view.

Luther's initial objection was not yet a fully developed Protestant rejection of the entire Roman system. His early concern involved questions about repentance, pastoral practice, the authority claimed for indulgences and the spiritual confidence being encouraged among the people.

Nevertheless, once the controversy began, it would lead much further than Luther initially anticipated.

A Church Already in Need of Reform

Luther was not the first person to criticise abuses within the medieval Church.

Calls for reform had existed long before 1517.

Concerns had been expressed about clerical immorality, ecclesiastical wealth, absentee bishops, the accumulation of church offices, political involvement by church leaders and the spiritual condition of clergy and people.

Earlier figures such as John Wycliffe in England and Jan Hus in Bohemia had raised much more fundamental questions concerning ecclesiastical authority and biblical truth.

Hus had been condemned and burned at the Council of Constance in 1415, almost seventy years before Luther's birth.

Luther would later discover that some positions for which he was being condemned bore uncomfortable similarities to propositions associated with Hus.

The Reformation therefore did not appear without precedent.

But circumstances in Luther's generation would allow controversy to spread with a speed earlier reformers had never experienced.

The Printing Press

One of the most important differences was printing.

Johannes Gutenberg's development of movable-type printing in Europe during the fifteenth century transformed the communication of ideas.

Before printing, books had to be copied by hand or produced through much slower methods. Books were expensive, and their circulation was comparatively limited.

Printing changed this dramatically.

By Luther's lifetime, pamphlets, sermons, theological arguments and translations could be reproduced in large numbers and transported from one city to another.

This would become enormously important to the Reformation.

Luther proved particularly effective at writing for this new medium. Some of his works could be printed quickly, sold cheaply and read far beyond Wittenberg. A university controversy could become a German controversy and then a European controversy with remarkable speed.

The Reformation was not caused by the printing press.

But without printing, its development would almost certainly have been very different.

Humanism and a Return to the Sources

The Renaissance also produced an intellectual movement usually called humanism.

The word can mislead modern readers. Renaissance humanism did not necessarily mean rejection of Christianity. Many humanists were deeply concerned with Christian learning.

One of their characteristic principles was expressed in the phrase ad fontes—"to the sources."

Rather than depending entirely upon later summaries and commentaries, scholars sought to recover and study ancient texts in their original languages.

For biblical studies this encouraged renewed attention to Hebrew and Greek.

Desiderius Erasmus, who would later become Luther's great opponent in the controversy over free will, was one of Europe's foremost humanist scholars. His published Greek New Testament would become enormously influential.

Here we encounter one of the fascinating features of the Reformation.

Luther and Erasmus shared certain concerns. Both could criticise corruption and superstition. Both valued learning. Both recognised the importance of returning to early sources.

Yet they eventually disagreed profoundly concerning the condition of man's will and the operation of divine grace.

That disagreement would produce ***The Bondage of the Will.***

The Holy Roman Empire

Luther's political world also requires explanation.

He was not born into a unified nation-state corresponding exactly to modern Germany. He lived within the Holy Roman Empire, a complicated collection of territories, cities, principalities and ecclesiastical jurisdictions.

The emperor possessed considerable dignity and authority, but individual princes and territorial rulers also exercised substantial power.

This political fragmentation would become important to Luther's survival.

Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, did not necessarily accept all of Luther's theological conclusions, but he insisted that Luther should receive proper treatment and resisted attempts simply to remove him without due process.

Political circumstances therefore became intertwined with theological controversy.

Again, this does not mean that the Reformation can be reduced to politics. Luther's central concerns were unmistakably theological.

But theological ideas do not develop outside history. The political structure of the Empire helped determine what happened to Luther once his teaching came under attack.

A World on the Eve of Reformation

Martin Luther therefore entered a world in which several powerful currents were already flowing.

The medieval Church remained immensely influential, yet demands for reform were widespread.

Scholastic theology remained dominant in the universities, yet humanist scholars were returning to original texts.

The papacy claimed extensive authority, yet rulers increasingly defended their own jurisdictions.

Books remained precious, yet printing was making the rapid circulation of ideas possible on an unprecedented scale.

Above all, the great questions of sin, grace, forgiveness, righteousness and eternal salvation remained intensely real.

Into this world came Martin Luther.

He did not begin life intending to divide Western Christendom. He did not enter university intending to become a Reformer. Nor did he enter the monastery with a programme for religious revolution.

Before there was Luther the Reformer, there was Luther the student, Luther the monk, and Luther the troubled sinner seeking peace with God.

It is there that we must turn next.

CHAPTER 2

From Student to Monk

Before Martin Luther became the Reformer who challenged indulgences, questioned papal authority and stood before the Diet of Worms, he was a young man preparing for an entirely different life.

His father expected him to become a lawyer.

Luther instead became a monk.

That decision has sometimes been reduced to the dramatic story of a thunderstorm in which the terrified young Luther vowed to enter a monastery if his life were spared. The event was certainly important, but it does not by itself explain the man who subsequently emerged.

Behind Luther's decision lay his upbringing, education, understanding of God, fear of judgment and increasingly serious concern about the salvation of his soul.

To understand Luther's later theology of grace, we must first understand the religious struggle through which he passed.

Luther's Family

Martin Luther was born at Eisleben on 10 November 1483 and was baptised the following day, the feast day of St Martin of Tours, from whom he received his name.

His parents were Hans and Margarethe Luther.

Shortly after Martin's birth, the family moved to Mansfeld, where his father became involved in copper mining and smelting. Hans Luther worked hard to improve the position of his family and eventually achieved a measure of prosperity and standing within the community.

He had ambitions for his son.

Martin was to receive an education and enter a respectable profession. His father particularly desired him to study law.

Luther's upbringing appears to have been disciplined and demanding. Later recollections of his childhood contain accounts of severe correction both at home and at school. Such discipline was not unusual for the period, and Luther's later descriptions should be interpreted within their historical setting. Nevertheless, they help us understand something of the seriousness with which authority, obedience and punishment were impressed upon him from an early age.

His home was also thoroughly religious.

The Christianity Luther knew as a child contained Christ, the Church, the sacraments, saints, angels, devils, judgment, heaven, hell and purgatory within one vivid spiritual world.

God was not a distant philosophical idea.

Eternity was real.

Luther's Education

Hans Luther invested considerably in his son's education.

Martin attended school first at Mansfeld and later at Magdeburg. He subsequently studied at Eisenach, where circumstances were more favourable and where he developed relationships that assisted his education.

In 1501 he entered the University of Erfurt.

Erfurt was one of the leading universities in Germany, and Luther received the education expected of a capable young scholar. He studied the liberal arts, including grammar, rhetoric and logic, and encountered the philosophical traditions that formed part of

late medieval university education.

He proved an able student.

Luther received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1502 and his Master of Arts degree in 1505.

His father's plans appeared to be succeeding.

Martin then began the study of law.

Had events followed the course Hans Luther intended, his son might have become a successful lawyer and remained unknown outside his own region.

Instead, within a matter of weeks, Luther abandoned legal studies and entered a monastery.

The Thunderstorm at Stotternheim

The event traditionally associated with this sudden change occurred on 2 July 1505.

Luther was returning to Erfurt after visiting his family when he was overtaken by a violent thunderstorm near Stotternheim. Lightning struck nearby, and Luther, fearing that he was about to die, cried out:

"Help me, St Anne! I will become a monk."

St Anne, traditionally regarded as the mother of the Virgin Mary, was widely venerated and was also associated with miners—an interesting connection given Luther's family background.

Luther survived.

He regarded the vow seriously.

Within approximately two weeks, despite the objections of friends and the profound displeasure of his father, Luther entered the monastery of the Augustinian Hermits at Erfurt.

The decision altered the course of his life.

But what exactly had happened?

Was Luther merely frightened by a thunderstorm?

That explanation is too simple.

The storm provided the immediate crisis, but Luther's response reveals the religious world already present within him. Faced suddenly with the possibility of death, his concern was not principally unfinished legal studies or worldly ambition.

He feared meeting God.

Why Become a Monk?

To the modern reader, entering a monastery may appear an extraordinary response to fear of death.

Within Luther's world it possessed a recognisable religious logic.

The monastic life was widely regarded as a particularly serious form of Christian devotion. By renouncing ordinary worldly ambitions and submitting himself to prayer, discipline, poverty, chastity and obedience, a man could devote himself more completely to God.

Luther did not enter the monastery because he had ceased to care about salvation.

He entered because he cared about it intensely.

He wanted peace with God.

The monastery therefore needs to be understood not simply as an institution from which Luther would eventually escape, but as the place in which he earnestly attempted to practise the religion he had been taught.

This is essential to understanding his later criticism of attempts to obtain righteousness through human works.

Luther's argument was not that he had never tried religious works.

He believed he had tried them with extraordinary seriousness.

Life in the Augustinian Order

Luther entered one of the stricter Augustinian houses.

The monastic life was regulated by prayer, worship, fasting, study, confession and obedience. Luther applied himself to these disciplines with characteristic intensity.

He was not, as later caricature sometimes suggests, a careless monk who discovered an easier religion.

Quite the opposite.

Luther sought to become a good monk.

He fasted. He prayed. He confessed his sins. He subjected himself to the discipline of the order. He attempted to examine his conscience carefully and to fulfil what was required of him.

He was ordained a priest in 1507.

The occasion of his first Mass was particularly significant. According to Luther's later recollection, he was overwhelmed by

the thought that he, a sinful man, was addressing the eternal and majestic God.

This reveals something central to his spiritual difficulty.

Luther did not struggle to believe that God existed.

He struggled because he believed God was holy.

The Problem of Confession

The sacrament of penance required the confession of sin.

For Luther this became a source not simply of comfort but of intense difficulty.

How could he be certain that he had confessed every sin?

What about sins he had forgotten?

What about sinful motives?

What about the inward corruption from which particular sinful actions arose?

Luther could confess at great length, only to return because another sin had come to mind.

His superior, Johann von Staupitz, became an important figure during this period.

Staupitz recognised that Luther's problem was deeper than the enumeration of individual offences. Luther was continually examining himself and finding further reason for condemnation.

The more seriously he sought righteousness within himself, the more conscious he became of his failure to possess it.

This experience would later inform his understanding of the human condition.

The problem of sin was not merely that men occasionally committed wrongful acts.

Something was wrong with man himself.

Did Luther Hate God?

Some of Luther's later recollections of this period are startling.

He described struggling with the biblical expression "the righteousness of God."

Rather than hearing those words as good news, he initially understood God's righteousness primarily as the righteousness by which the just God judges and punishes sinners.

If God is perfectly righteous and Luther is a sinner, how could the righteousness of God be anything other than terrifying?

Luther later described the intensity of this struggle in extraordinarily strong terms, even speaking of hatred towards the righteous God who condemns sinners.

We should understand what he meant.

Luther was not describing atheism. Nor was he saying that he simply rejected God.

His anguish arose precisely because he took God seriously.

He believed in God's holiness, God's justice and God's judgment. What he could not discover was how a sinner such as himself could stand before such a God with confidence.

The question that would dominate his theological development was beginning to emerge:

How can a sinner be righteous before God?

Staupitz and the Direction Towards Christ

Johann von Staupitz played an important role in directing Luther away from endless introspection.

Rather than continually searching within himself for sufficient repentance, Staupitz encouraged Luther to look towards Christ.

This did not immediately resolve all Luther's difficulties. His theological development took place over time, through study, teaching, pastoral experience and controversy.

Nevertheless, the direction was significant.

If salvation depended upon discovering something adequate within Luther—sufficient sorrow, sufficient repentance, sufficient obedience—then Luther could never possess certainty.

But what if the ground of salvation was to be found outside himself, in Christ?

That question would eventually transform his understanding of the Gospel.

From Monk to Theologian

Staupitz also encouraged Luther to undertake theological study.

This is important because Luther's spiritual struggle did not lead him away from intellectual work. It drove him more deeply into Scripture.

In 1508 Luther was sent to the recently established University of Wittenberg, where he taught and continued his studies. After a

period back at Erfurt and a journey to Rome connected with affairs of the Augustinian order, he returned to Wittenberg.

In 1512 Luther received the degree of Doctor of Theology.

He then assumed responsibility for teaching the Bible.

This would prove decisive.

Luther was no longer merely a monk struggling with his own conscience. He was becoming a biblical lecturer whose vocation required him to expound Scripture to others.

His lectures would take him deeply into the Psalms, Romans, Galatians and Hebrews.

And in those Scriptures he encountered repeatedly the subjects that already troubled him:

sin, righteousness, faith, grace, judgment and the promises of God.

Luther's Journey to Rome

Luther's journey to Rome, probably undertaken in 1510–1511, later acquired considerable significance in accounts of his development.

He travelled there on business connected with his Augustinian order.

For a devout monk, Rome was the centre of Western Christianity, the city associated with the apostles Peter and Paul and the seat of the papacy.

Luther participated in the religious opportunities available to a pilgrim.

Yet he was also disturbed by aspects of what he encountered.

Later Protestant accounts sometimes portray the visit as though Luther arrived as a loyal Roman Catholic and returned almost immediately as a Protestant Reformer.

That is too simple.

Luther did not return from Rome having rejected the papacy or the medieval Church.

The significance of the journey lies rather in the fact that personal observation contributed to a growing awareness that the visible religious institution did not always correspond to the spiritual ideals it claimed to represent.

The decisive theological questions still lay ahead.

The Search for a Gracious God

It is tempting to read Luther's early life backwards from the Reformation and imagine that everything inevitably led to 1517.

It did not.

The young Luther did not know that he would challenge indulgences, confront the papacy, translate the Bible or become involved in a European religious upheaval.

His immediate concern was far more personal.

He sought a gracious God.

He had attempted to find peace through monastic discipline.

He had confessed.

He had prayed.

He had fasted.

He had studied.

Yet the fundamental problem remained.

If righteousness meant that Luther himself must become sufficiently righteous to stand before the righteous God, how could he ever know that he had done enough?

The answer would not come through abandoning the question.

It would come through Scripture.

From the Monastery to the Bible

This is one of the great transitions necessary for understanding Luther.

The monk who had entered the monastery seeking salvation through the most serious religious life available to him gradually became a theologian compelled to ask whether the answer he sought had been misunderstood.

The decisive issue would increasingly concern the meaning of God's righteousness and the place of faith.

What did Paul mean when he wrote:

> *"For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith."*
>
> — Romans 1:17

For the troubled monk, this text had once intensified the problem.

In time, Luther would come to read it very differently.

And when his understanding of the righteousness of God changed, his understanding of the Gospel changed with it.

That development brings us to the next stage in Luther's life.

CHAPTER 3

Luther and the Scriptures

Martin Luther entered the monastery seeking peace with God. He applied himself seriously to the religious disciplines available to him, yet those disciplines did not resolve the question that troubled his conscience.

How could a sinful man stand righteous before a holy God?

The importance of Luther's subsequent theological education lies in the fact that he was increasingly compelled to seek the answer in Holy Scripture itself.

Before Luther became famous for challenging indulgences or questioning papal authority, he was a teacher of the Bible. His work as a lecturer at the University of Wittenberg required him to study Scripture closely and explain it to others.

It was in this work that some of the convictions later associated with the Reformation began to take clearer form.

Doctor of Theology

In 1512 Luther received the degree of Doctor of Theology at Wittenberg.

This was more than an academic distinction. Luther understood that he had been given a responsibility to teach the Scriptures.

He succeeded Johann von Staupitz in the chair of biblical theology and began a period of intensive biblical exposition.

His early lectures included:

- the Psalms, beginning in 1513;
- Romans, 1515–1516;
- Galatians, 1516–1517;
- and Hebrews, 1517–1518.

These dates are significant.

Luther's serious engagement with these biblical books was already underway before the publication of the Ninety-Five Theses in October 1517.

The theological development that eventually produced the public Reformation controversy did not therefore begin with indulgences.

Something was already happening in Luther's reading of Scripture.

The Bible Luther Studied

Luther had been educated within the theological world of the medieval Church, and the Latin Vulgate was the Bible with which he was most familiar.

But the intellectual climate of his age was changing.

Renaissance humanism had encouraged scholars to return ad fontes—to the sources. Increasing attention was being given to the biblical languages, and the publication of Erasmus's Greek New Testament in 1516 provided scholars with an important tool for studying the New Testament text.

Luther increasingly worked with Hebrew and Greek as well as Latin.

This did not mean that he immediately discarded everything he had previously learned. Rather, direct engagement with the biblical text increasingly gave him a standard by which inherited interpretations could themselves be examined.

That principle would eventually have enormous consequences.

The Psalms

Luther's first major series of biblical lectures at Wittenberg concerned the Psalms.

The Psalms brought him repeatedly into contact with themes already central to his personal spiritual struggle: righteousness, judgment, suffering, mercy, faith and the deliverance of God.

Increasingly, Luther interpreted Scripture in relation to Christ.

This Christ-centred reading would become characteristic of his theology. The Bible was not merely a collection of moral instructions telling man how to become righteous. It testified to God's saving work in Christ.

This represented an important change of emphasis.

If Scripture were principally a demand telling sinful man what he must achieve, Luther's problem remained.

But if Scripture proclaimed what God had accomplished for sinners in Christ, the direction of the question changed.

Instead of asking only:

What must I do to become righteous?

the reader was compelled to ask:

What has God done in Christ for the unrighteous?

Romans

Luther's lectures on Romans were particularly important.

Paul's epistle confronted him directly with sin, law, righteousness, faith, grace and justification.

Romans did not allow the problem of sin to be reduced merely to individual outward transgressions. Paul presented mankind as universally under sin.

As it is written:

"There is none righteous, no, not one."

— Romans 3:10

And again:

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

— Romans 3:23

If this diagnosis were taken seriously, salvation could not simply consist in helping fundamentally capable men to become somewhat better.

Man's problem was deeper.

This would become crucial when Luther later disputed with Erasmus concerning free will.

The question was not merely whether men make choices. Obviously they do.

The question was whether fallen man possesses within himself the spiritual ability to turn towards God, believe savingly and contribute to his justification.

Luther's answer would increasingly be shaped by Paul's description of fallen humanity.

The Righteousness of God

One expression in Romans caused Luther particular difficulty:

"For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith."

— Romans 1:17

Luther later described how deeply he had struggled with the words "the righteousness of God."

He had understood the expression principally in terms of God's own perfect righteousness—the righteousness by which the righteous God judges sinners.

For a man already deeply conscious of his sin, this was terrifying rather than comforting.

If God is righteous and Luther is unrighteous, what hope could there be?

The Gospel itself seemed to reveal the very righteousness before which the sinner stood condemned.

But Luther gradually came to understand Paul's words differently.

The righteousness revealed in the Gospel was not merely the righteousness by which God judges. Luther came to understand it in connection with the righteousness which God gives and which the sinner receives through faith.

The words that had terrified him began to appear as good news.

"The Just Shall Live by Faith"

The final words of Romans 1:17 are taken from Habakkuk:

"The just shall live by his faith."

— Habakkuk 2:4

For Luther, this became enormously important.

The sinner does not establish his righteousness before God by accumulating sufficient merit. He lives by faith.

This did not mean that Luther regarded good works as worthless or that the Christian life was irrelevant.

The order was the issue.

Works do not provide the foundation upon which the sinner earns acceptance with God. Rather, the justified sinner, having received God's grace through faith, produces good works as the fruit of that faith.

This distinction would become one of the defining principles of the Reformation.

The So-Called Tower Experience

Luther later gave a famous account of his discovery concerning the righteousness of God. Because he mentioned meditating in a tower, the event has commonly become known as Luther's "Tower Experience."

It has sometimes been presented as though the entire Reformation began in a single dramatic moment when Luther suddenly discovered justification by faith.

The historical situation is more complicated.

Scholars have debated precisely when the experience Luther later described occurred and how it should be related to the development visible in his early lectures.

For our purposes, we need not depend upon assigning a precise date to one dramatic conversion of theological understanding.

The more important point is clear.

Through sustained engagement with Scripture, Luther's understanding of righteousness was changing.

He increasingly ceased to think of justification as the successful achievement of a sinner who, assisted by grace, finally became sufficiently righteous to stand before God.

Instead, the emphasis moved towards God's gracious action towards the sinner, received through faith.

Luther later described the effect of this discovery in language suggesting that the Scriptures themselves had opened to him in a new way.

Justification and the External Word

Another important feature of Luther's developing theology was his increasing emphasis upon God's promise.

Luther's troubled conscience had repeatedly driven him inward.

Had he repented sufficiently?

Had he confessed every sin?

Was his sorrow genuine?

Was his obedience adequate?

But if assurance depended upon measuring the quality of something within himself, certainty remained impossible.

The Gospel directed him elsewhere.

God speaks a promise.

Faith receives that promise.

The foundation therefore lies not in the fluctuating condition of the sinner's feelings but in the Word and promise of God.

This helps explain the importance Luther would later attach to what is sometimes called the external Word—the Word that comes to man from outside himself.

The sinner does not create the Gospel within his own heart.

God declares it.

Scripture Begins to Judge Tradition

A still more far-reaching consequence was beginning to emerge.

If Luther discovered through Scripture that an inherited theological explanation was mistaken, what should he do?

Initially this question did not necessarily imply a rejection of the authority of the Church.

But once controversies began, the issue became unavoidable.

Luther's increasing commitment to the biblical text meant that inherited teaching could no longer be accepted merely because it was inherited.

Church authorities, theologians and councils made claims.

But those claims themselves had to be examined.

By what standard?

Increasingly Luther's answer was:

Holy Scripture.

This principle did not reach its mature public expression immediately. It developed through controversy.

But the foundation had been laid.

The university lecturer who had been required to expound Scripture was gradually becoming convinced that Scripture possessed an authority by which even ecclesiastical claims must be judged.

Galatians

Luther's early lectures on Galatians reinforced many of the themes he had encountered in Romans.

Paul's contrast between faith and the works of the law was particularly significant.

Paul writes:

> *"Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ."*
>
> — Galatians 2:16

For Luther, the question of justification increasingly concerned the very heart of Christianity.

If a man could establish his righteousness before God through works, Christ's saving work was diminished.

If righteousness were God's gift received through faith, then boasting was excluded.

The glory of salvation belonged to God.

This conviction would later contribute directly to Luther's fierce opposition to any teaching which, in his judgment, attributed to fallen man an independent ability to move himself towards salvation.

Law and Gospel

During this developing period another distinction became increasingly important in Luther's theology: Law and Gospel.

The Law reveals God's righteous requirement.

It commands.

It exposes sin.

It condemns the sinner who fails to fulfil its demands.

The Gospel, however, announces what God has done in Christ.

It promises forgiveness.

It directs the sinner away from confidence in himself towards confidence in Christ.

This distinction should not be misunderstood as though the Old Testament were simply Law and the New Testament simply Gospel. Luther could find both command and promise throughout Scripture.

The distinction concerned the different functions of God's Word.

The Law says, in effect:

This is what God requires.

The Gospel declares:

This is what God has provided in Christ.

For the Luther who had exhausted himself attempting to find sufficient righteousness within himself, the distinction was profound.

Faith and Good Works

Luther's insistence upon justification by faith inevitably raised another question.

If works do not justify, why should Christians perform good works?

Luther's answer was not that good works are unnecessary.

Rather, he distinguished between works as the cause of justification and works as the fruit of faith.

A man is not accepted by God because his works have made him righteous.

The believer performs good works because he has received mercy

and has been brought into a new relationship with God.

This would later be expressed particularly powerfully in Luther's The Freedom of a Christian.

True faith does not produce indifference to obedience.

It produces willing service.

The difference is that such service no longer functions as the price by which salvation is purchased.

From Personal Discovery to Public Controversy

By 1517 Luther had not yet reached every conclusion that would characterise his later theology.

He was still developing.

He remained within the institutional Church.

He had not yet rejected papal authority.

He had not yet stood at Worms.

He had not yet written The Bondage of the Will.

Nevertheless, something fundamental had changed.

His biblical studies had increasingly convinced him that the sinner's standing before God depended upon divine grace received through faith rather than upon the accumulation of human merit.

Then Luther encountered a religious practice that appeared to him to offer Christians confidence upon entirely different grounds.

Indulgence preaching was taking place near Wittenberg.

People were being encouraged to believe that indulgences could provide remission of temporal punishment associated with sin, and the practice had become connected with financial contributions.

For Luther the pastor and biblical lecturer, this was no longer merely an abstract theological issue.

It affected the souls of people under his care.

The question was about to move from the lecture hall into public controversy.

On 31 October 1517, Luther sent a series of propositions concerning indulgences for academic discussion.

They became known as the **Ninety-Five Theses.**

Neither Luther nor his opponents could have foreseen where they would lead.

CHAPTER 4

The Ninety-Five Theses

On 31 October 1517, Martin Luther sent a document containing ninety-five propositions concerning indulgences to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. According to the traditional account, he also posted them on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, a place commonly used for announcing matters for academic discussion.

The document became known as the **Ninety-Five Theses.**

Few documents in Christian history have acquired such symbolic importance. The date is commonly regarded as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, and Luther is often pictured standing defiantly against the Roman Church with his completed Protestant theology already firmly established.

The historical reality was more complicated.

The Luther of October 1517 was certainly becoming deeply dissatisfied with the preaching and theology surrounding indulgences. His biblical studies had already altered his understanding of repentance, righteousness and grace. Yet he had not at this point rejected the papacy, abandoned the sacramental structure of the Church, or formulated all the doctrines that would later characterise the Reformation.

To understand Luther properly, therefore, we must read the Ninety-Five Theses as a document of 1517, not as though Luther had written them after the Diet of Worms or after The Bondage of the Will.

They mark the beginning of a public controversy, not the completion of Luther's theological development.

What Was an Indulgence?

The medieval doctrine of indulgences developed within the Church's teaching concerning sin, confession, penance and temporal punishment.

According to the theological distinction involved, the guilt of sin could be forgiven while temporal punishment associated with that sin remained. An indulgence concerned the remission of this temporal punishment.

This was connected with the Church's penitential system and eventually with the doctrine of purgatory.

By Luther's time, indulgences could be granted under particular conditions, and financial contributions became associated with

certain indulgence campaigns.

This created obvious opportunities for misunderstanding and abuse.

An ordinary Christian hearing an indulgence preacher might not grasp the careful distinctions made by theologians. The practical impression could easily arise that spiritual benefits were available in exchange for money.

It was precisely this pastoral consequence that deeply concerned Luther.

Johann Tetzel

The name most famously associated with the indulgence controversy is Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar and experienced indulgence preacher.

Tetzel was involved in preaching an indulgence authorised in connection with Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz and Pope Leo X. Part of the financial arrangements surrounding the campaign was connected with Albrecht's obligations arising from his acquisition of ecclesiastical office, while proceeds were also associated with the rebuilding of St Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Tetzel did not preach within Electoral Saxony itself because Frederick the Wise had prohibited the campaign in his territory. Nevertheless, people from Wittenberg could travel into neighbouring areas where the indulgence was available.

Some returned with indulgence certificates.

For Luther, this became a pastoral problem.

If people believed that purchasing an indulgence relieved them of the necessity of genuine repentance, the practice was not merely questionable administration.

It endangered their understanding of the Gospel.

Luther's First Thesis

The opening thesis immediately reveals Luther's principal concern:

> **When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.**

This is an important starting point.

Luther was not initially arguing that repentance was unnecessary

because salvation was by faith.

He was arguing almost the opposite.

True Christian repentance could not be reduced to an external transaction.

Christ called the believer to a life of repentance.

The issue therefore concerned the nature of repentance itself.

Was repentance fundamentally an ecclesiastical process administered through prescribed acts, or did Christ's command reach much more deeply into the whole Christian life?

Already we can see how Luther's biblical studies were beginning to affect his criticism of contemporary practice.

Luther Had Not Yet Rejected the Pope

This point is essential.

The Ninety-Five Theses should not be read as a declaration that the pope possessed no legitimate authority.

Luther still spoke of the pope in ways that would surprise readers familiar only with his later writings.

Indeed, some theses proceed upon the assumption that the pope himself would disapprove of the abuses Luther was attacking.

Luther even suggested that if the pope knew how indulgence preachers were exploiting the poor, he would prefer St Peter's Basilica to be reduced to ashes rather than built from the skin, flesh and bones of his sheep.

The criticism was severe.

But Luther was not yet saying:

The papacy itself is unscriptural and must be rejected.

That conclusion belonged to a later stage of the controversy.

In 1517 Luther could still imagine that abuses were being committed which the pope, properly informed, would wish to correct.

This is precisely why chronology matters when reading Luther.

The Treasury of the Church

Indulgence theology was connected with the idea of the treasury of the Church, understood in relation to the merits of Christ and the saints.

Luther questioned the way this treasury was being explained.

In one of the most memorable theses he proposed:

The true treasure of the Church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.

This statement points towards something that would become increasingly central to Luther's theology.

The Church's true wealth was not a spiritual treasury administered through indulgences.

Its treasure was the Gospel.

Yet even here we should resist the temptation to make Luther of 1517 say everything Luther of later years would say.

The significance lies in the direction in which his thought was moving.

Increasingly, the question became:

Where has God actually promised forgiveness and salvation?

If confidence rested upon something that could not be established from God's Word, Luther regarded that confidence as spiritually dangerous.

The Poor and the Purchase of Indulgences

Luther was also concerned about the economic consequences of indulgence preaching.

Money spent upon indulgences was money that could otherwise have been used to support a person's household or assist the poor.

He therefore insisted that Christians who saw someone in need and neglected him in order to purchase indulgences had misunderstood Christian duty.

This illustrates an important feature of Luther's objection.

His concern was not merely theoretical.

Bad theology produced bad pastoral consequences.

If people believed that purchasing a religious benefit was more spiritually valuable than showing mercy to their neighbour, something had gone seriously wrong.

The Gospel could not be reduced to a financial transaction.

What About Purgatory?

The Ninety-Five Theses also contain numerous references to purgatory.

This again demonstrates that Luther had not yet arrived at all his

later positions.

Rather than simply denying purgatory in 1517, he questioned claims being made about the condition of souls there and the supposed effects of indulgences upon them.

He asked how anyone could possess certainty concerning matters for which adequate authority had not been demonstrated.

Some of his questions were deliberately provocative.

If the pope possessed the power to release souls from purgatory, why would he not do so freely out of holy love rather than in connection with the raising of money?

The force of the question was obvious.

It exposed the tension between claims of spiritual authority and the financial arrangements surrounding indulgences.

Academic Debate Becomes Public Controversy

Luther's theses were written in Latin and framed as propositions for disputation.

Had they remained within the university, their effect might have been limited.

But printing changed everything.

Copies were made, translated into German and distributed.

Within a remarkably short period, Luther's objections became known far beyond Wittenberg.

This was something new.

A theological dispute could now move rapidly from a university into the wider population.

Luther had entered the age of print, and he proved extraordinarily effective within it.

The controversy also demonstrated that his concerns touched a widespread dissatisfaction. The Ninety-Five Theses attracted attention because indulgences and ecclesiastical abuses were already matters of public concern.

Luther had struck a nerve.

Was 31 October 1517 the Beginning of the Reformation?

It is understandable that historians should use 31 October 1517 as a convenient date for the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

Something unquestionably significant began with the indulgence controversy.

Nevertheless, we should distinguish between a historical starting point and a fully developed theology.

Luther did not wake on 31 October as a medieval Catholic and go to bed as the Protestant Reformer familiar from later history.

His development was gradual.

Indeed, if Luther of 1525 had been able to read some of Luther's assumptions in 1517 as though they had been written by another theologian, he might himself have criticised them.

That is not a weakness in our study of Luther.

It is one of the reasons he is worth studying.

We can observe a theologian being driven by controversy back to questions he had not originally intended to ask.

From Indulgences to Authority

The indulgence dispute soon produced a much larger question.

Suppose Luther's opponents could demonstrate that indulgence teaching had been approved by ecclesiastical authorities.

Would that settle the matter?

For Luther, increasingly, it would not.

The question became:

What if an ecclesiastical authority teaches something that cannot be established from Scripture?

At first Luther attempted to argue that indulgence abuses were inconsistent with the proper intentions of the Church and pope.

But his opponents pressed him.

If the pope had authority to grant indulgences, who was an obscure university professor to question them?

Luther was therefore forced to examine the nature of papal authority itself.

And once that question was raised, the controversy could no longer remain confined to indulgences.

Scripture and the Developing Controversy

The significance of the Ninety-Five Theses lies therefore partly in what they contain and partly in what they set in motion.

Luther's opponents required him to justify his position.

Luther responded by appealing increasingly to Scripture.

His opponents appealed to ecclesiastical authority and established

teaching.

The dispute therefore began to expose two fundamentally different questions:

What does the Church teach?

and:

What can be demonstrated from the Word of God?

At this stage Luther had not yet separated those questions completely. He still hoped that properly understood ecclesiastical authority would agree with Scripture.

But events would increasingly force him to confront the possibility that they might conflict.

Understanding the Ninety-Five Theses

The Ninety-Five Theses are therefore best understood neither as an insignificant academic exercise nor as a complete Protestant confession of faith.

They stand between those extremes.

They reveal a theologian whose biblical understanding was changing and who had become convinced that contemporary indulgence preaching was spiritually dangerous.

They also reveal how much of Luther's later theology had not yet developed.

This makes them particularly valuable for Understanding Luther.

If we begin with the mature Reformer and read everything backwards, Luther's development disappears. But if we allow the documents to speak chronologically, we can watch the central questions emerge.

In 1517 the question concerned indulgences.

Very soon it would concern the pope.

Then councils.

Then the authority of Scripture.

Then the nature of the Church.

And eventually the very question of man's ability before God.

The road from the Ninety-Five Theses to The Bondage of the Will was not short or inevitable.

But Luther had taken the first public step.

The Controversy Deepens

Rome did not regard Luther's growing challenge as merely an academic disagreement.

The Dominican theologian Sylvester Prierias defended papal authority against him. Cardinal Cajetan questioned Luther at Augsburg in 1518. Luther was increasingly required either to withdraw his claims or explain the authority upon which he made them.

Then, in 1519, came a controversy that pushed the matter considerably further.

At Leipzig, Luther debated Johann Eck.

Eck recognised where Luther's argument was leading and pressed him upon the authority of popes and councils. During that debate Luther was confronted with the teaching of Jan Hus, who had been condemned as a heretic a century earlier.

Luther found himself forced to acknowledge that some of Hus's condemned propositions were Christian and evangelical.

The implications were enormous.

If a Church council could condemn something that was actually true, then a council could err.

And if councils could err, the question became unavoidable:

Where does final authority lie?

That is where we turn next.

CHAPTER 5

From Reform to Reformation

The publication of the Ninety-Five Theses did not immediately make Martin Luther an enemy of the Roman Church. His original dispute concerned indulgences, repentance and the pastoral consequences of claims being made in the name of ecclesiastical authority.

But controversy has a way of exposing questions lying beneath the original disagreement.

Luther's opponents increasingly demanded that he explain not merely why he objected to indulgences, but by what authority he presumed to object at all.

If the pope possessed authority to grant indulgences, what right had a university theologian at Wittenberg to question them?

If the teaching of the Church stood against Luther's interpretation,

should Luther not simply submit?

And if councils and popes had already spoken, was the matter not settled?

These questions transformed the controversy.

What began as an attempt to reform a particular practice increasingly became a dispute concerning the source of authority in the Christian Church.

Luther was being driven towards a choice he had not originally intended to make.

Rome Responds

The rapid circulation of Luther's theses ensured that the controversy could not easily be contained within Wittenberg.

Complaints concerning Luther reached Rome, and theologians began to respond to him.

One important opponent was the Dominican theologian Sylvester Prierias, who emphasised the authority of the pope and the Church. His response helped bring the fundamental issue into sharper focus.

If the pope's teaching possessed decisive authority, Luther's appeal against indulgence doctrine could be answered simply by pointing to that authority.

But Luther was becoming increasingly unwilling to accept such an answer.

The question for him was no longer merely:

Has the Church approved this teaching?

It was becoming:

Can this teaching be demonstrated from Holy Scripture?

That distinction would prove revolutionary.

Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg

In October 1518 Luther appeared before Cardinal Thomas Cajetan at Augsburg.

Cajetan was an accomplished theologian and representative of papal authority. He expected Luther to retract teachings regarded as erroneous.

Luther wanted to be shown from Scripture where he was wrong.

The discussions therefore revealed the growing distance between the two sides.

Cajetan was not merely dealing with an undisciplined monk who had objected to bad indulgence preaching. Luther was beginning to question theological claims underlying the system itself.

One matter concerned the efficacy of indulgences. Another concerned the nature of faith and the assurance associated with receiving divine grace.

Luther refused simply to retract without being convinced.

This pattern would become increasingly characteristic of him.

He was willing to be corrected, he insisted, but correction had to be established from proper authority—and increasingly the authority he required was biblical.

Luther Appeals

As the possibility of condemnation increased, Luther appealed first from the pope badly informed to the pope better informed.

This is significant.

It demonstrates again that Luther had not suddenly rejected the papacy in 1517.

He still entertained the possibility that the pope, properly informed, might judge the matter differently.

But as the controversy developed, Luther's appeals moved further.

He eventually appealed to a general council.

This too would become problematic.

For what happened if councils themselves could err?

The question would soon become unavoidable.

Johann Eck

The man who did much to force Luther to face the implications of his position was Johann Eck.

Eck was a skilled theologian and formidable debater. He recognised that the dispute extended beyond indulgences and identified implications in Luther's arguments that Luther himself had not always stated openly.

The confrontation came to a head in the Leipzig Debate of 1519.

The debate originally involved Luther's colleague Andreas Karlstadt, but Luther and Eck became its principal figures.

Their disagreement moved into questions concerning papal supremacy and the authority of councils.

Eck's strategy was particularly effective.

He connected some of Luther's positions with those of the Bohemian reformer Jan Hus.

That was a dangerous comparison.

Jan Hus

Jan Hus had been condemned for heresy at the Council of Constance and burned at the stake in 1415.

To associate Luther with Hus was therefore to place him in dangerous company.

At first Luther resisted the comparison.

But when he examined some of the propositions attributed to Hus, he was forced into a remarkable admission.

Some of the teachings for which Hus had been condemned were, Luther concluded, genuinely Christian.

The implications were profound.

If the Council of Constance had condemned propositions that were actually true, then a general council could err.

And if a general council could err, appeal to a council could not provide the final answer to the question of authority.

Luther had reached a critical point.

Can Councils Err?

The medieval Church did not regard councils as casual gatherings of theologians. A general council possessed enormous ecclesiastical authority.

Yet Luther was increasingly convinced that neither historical importance nor institutional authority guaranteed freedom from error.

This did not mean that councils possessed no value.

Nor did it mean that Luther believed every individual Christian could simply disregard the historic Church and invent doctrine privately.

The issue was more fundamental.

No human authority could possess the right to teach contrary to the Word of God.

Popes could err.

Councils could err.

Theologians could err.

Luther himself could err.

But Scripture, as the Word of God, could not be placed under the judgment of those human authorities.

The direction of Luther's thought was becoming increasingly clear.

Scripture and Tradition

This development is sometimes summarised by the Reformation expression sola Scriptura—Scripture alone.

The expression must be understood carefully.

It does not mean that Christians should ignore history, teachers, creeds or the testimony of the Church.

Luther himself constantly appealed to earlier Christian writers, particularly Augustine. He valued theological learning and did not imagine that Christianity had disappeared between the apostles and the sixteenth century.

The issue concerned final authority.

When Scripture and a human authority appeared to conflict, which must judge the other?

Luther's answer was increasingly that the Church stood under Scripture, not Scripture under the Church.

The Church did not create the Word of God.

It received it.

This represented a fundamental challenge to the structure of authority upon which Luther's opponents relied.

The Question Becomes Larger

By the end of the Leipzig Debate, Luther's dispute could no longer reasonably be described as merely a disagreement about indulgences.

The controversy now concerned:

the authority of the pope;

the authority of councils;

the place of Scripture;

the nature of the Church;

and increasingly,

the means by which a sinner is justified before God.

Each question led naturally to another.

If Scripture possessed supreme authority, doctrines and practices had to be tested by Scripture.

If justification came through faith rather than human merit,

the whole structure by which merit was understood required examination.

If the Gospel announced God's free promise in Christ, the Church's task was to proclaim that promise faithfully rather than obscure it.

Luther's programme was therefore becoming much more than the correction of an abuse.

Reform was becoming Reformation.

The Year 1520

The year 1520 was decisive.

Luther published several works in rapid succession which demonstrated how far his thinking had developed since 1517.

Three are particularly important:

To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation

The Babylonian Captivity of the Church

and

The Freedom of a Christian

Together they challenged major features of the medieval ecclesiastical and sacramental system.

These were no longer simply propositions for an academic debate concerning indulgences.

Luther was now addressing fundamental questions concerning the Church, the sacraments, Christian liberty and the relationship between clergy and laity.

To the Christian Nobility **of** *the German Nation*

In To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, Luther challenged what he regarded as barriers erected to protect ecclesiastical authority from reform.

One of his important arguments concerned the distinction between clergy and laity.

Luther did not deny that Christians could hold different offices within the Church.

But he rejected the idea that ordination created a spiritually superior class of Christian.

All believers belonged to Christ.

This contributed to what later became known as the doctrine of

the priesthood of all believers.

Luther also appealed to secular rulers to assist in reform where ecclesiastical authorities refused to act.

This had major political as well as theological implications.

The Babylonian Captivity of the Church

In The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Luther turned particularly to the sacramental system.

The title itself reveals the increasing severity of his criticism.

Luther examined the sacraments in light of Scripture and questioned whether all those recognised by the medieval Church possessed biblical warrant as sacraments instituted by Christ.

He particularly addressed baptism and the Lord's Supper, while also discussing penance.

His sacramental theology was still developing, and Luther would later disagree sharply with other Reformers concerning the Lord's Supper.

Nevertheless, the principle was increasingly evident:

Ecclesiastical practice must be judged by Christ's institution and the Word of God.

The Freedom of a Christian

The Freedom of a Christian approached the Reformation from another direction.

Luther expressed the Christian's position in a famous paradox:

> **A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.**

The apparent contradiction expresses an important feature of Luther's understanding of justification and good works.

The Christian does not perform works in order to purchase justification before God.

In that sense he is free.

But the faith that receives God's grace does not make him selfish or indifferent towards others.

Freed from the need to establish his own righteousness through works, he is free to serve his neighbour in love.

Good works therefore have an essential place in the Christian life.

They simply occupy a different place from that assigned to them when they are made the ground of justification.

The Papal Bull

Rome's response became increasingly severe.

In June 1520 Pope Leo X issued the papal bull Exsurge Domine, condemning a number of propositions drawn from Luther's writings and threatening him with excommunication unless he recanted.

Luther was given an opportunity to submit.

Instead, in December 1520, he publicly burned the papal bull together with books of canon law outside Wittenberg.

The symbolism was unmistakable.

The dispute had reached the point of open rupture.

Luther was subsequently excommunicated by the bull Decet Romanum Pontificem in January 1521.

The monk who in 1517 had hoped the pope might correct abuses was now himself condemned by the pope.

The development had taken little more than three years.

Was Luther Now His Own Authority?

At this point an important misunderstanding must be avoided.

If Luther rejected the final authority of pope and council, did he simply make Martin Luther the final authority instead?

That would have contradicted the principle for which he was contending.

Luther's argument was not:

The pope is wrong because Luther is right.

It was:

Every human teacher, including Luther, must be judged by the Word of God.

Whether Luther always applied that principle consistently is another question, and throughout this book we shall reserve the right to examine his conclusions critically.

But the principle itself was fundamental.

The authority of Scripture did not depend upon Luther.

Rather, Luther claimed that his own teaching stood under its authority.

The Road to Worms

Excommunication did not end the matter.

Luther's teaching had spread widely, and the controversy now involved the political authorities of the Holy Roman Empire.

A new emperor, Charles V, had been elected in 1519.

The question of Luther would come before the imperial assembly—the Diet of Worms—in 1521.

There Luther would be confronted not merely with individual theological propositions but with his published writings.

He would be asked whether the books were his.

And then he would be asked the decisive question:

Would he retract them?

Luther's answer would become one of the defining moments of the Reformation.

But the real importance of Worms does not lie merely in the drama of one man standing before emperor and princes.

The fundamental question was the one that had been developing ever since the indulgence controversy began:

> **When conscience, ecclesiastical authority and the Word of God appear to stand in conflict, which authority must finally prevail?**

That is where we turn next.

CHAPTER 6

Worms and the Question of Authority

By the beginning of 1521, Martin Luther's controversy with Rome had reached a decisive stage.

He had been condemned by the papal bull Exsurge Domine. He had publicly burned that bull at Wittenberg. In January 1521 Pope Leo X formally excommunicated him.

Yet excommunication did not settle the matter.

Luther lived within the Holy Roman Empire, and the enforcement of ecclesiastical condemnation had political consequences. His writings had circulated widely throughout Germany. He enjoyed considerable popular support, and Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, continued to insist that he should not simply be condemned without being heard.

The matter therefore came before the imperial assembly meeting at Worms in 1521.

The event has become one of the most famous scenes of the Protestant Reformation: Luther standing before emperor, princes and representatives of the Church, refusing to deny what he had written.

But as with the Ninety-Five Theses, the familiar story can become simplified.

To understand Worms properly, we must ask what Luther was actually required to do and why his answer was so important.

Charles V

The Holy Roman Emperor was Charles V.

Charles was still a young man, but he ruled over an extraordinary collection of territories. He regarded himself as a defender of the Catholic faith and had no intention of allowing religious division to destroy the unity of the Empire.

From Charles's perspective, Luther was not merely an academic theologian engaged in an interesting biblical debate.

He had been condemned by the pope.

His writings were causing widespread controversy.

The question now concerned whether imperial authority would act against him.

Yet Charles also had to take account of the German princes and the political structure of the Empire.

Luther could not simply be seized without consequence.

He was therefore summoned to appear before the Diet under a promise of safe conduct.

Luther Goes to Worms

Luther left Wittenberg in April 1521.

The journey itself demonstrated how greatly circumstances had changed since 1517.

The obscure university lecturer who had originally proposed an academic discussion concerning indulgences was now known throughout Germany.

Crowds gathered as he travelled.

Friends warned him of the danger.

The memory of Jan Hus could hardly have been forgotten. Hus

had travelled to the Council of Constance under a promise of safe conduct and had nevertheless been condemned and burned.

Luther understood that his own journey could end badly.

Nevertheless, he went.

Later accounts have preserved characteristically forceful statements attributed to him concerning his determination to enter Worms despite the opposition he might face. Whatever the precise wording of every recollection, there is little doubt that Luther knew the seriousness of the situation.

Before the Diet

Luther appeared before the imperial assembly on 17 April 1521.

Before him were copies of his books.

He was asked two questions.

First:

Were these books his?

Second:

Would he retract what he had written in them?

Luther acknowledged the books.

But he did not immediately answer the second question.

Instead, he asked for time to consider.

This is worth noticing.

The famous image of Luther as a man who instantly delivered a heroic declaration can obscure the seriousness with which he approached the matter.

He understood that his answer concerned the Word of God and the salvation of souls. He did not wish to speak rashly.

He was granted until the following day.

Luther's Answer

On 18 April 1521, Luther appeared again.

His answer was more carefully developed.

He explained that his writings were not all of one kind.

Some concerned Christian faith and morals and contained teaching that even his opponents might recognise as useful. To retract such writings indiscriminately would be to condemn truths generally acknowledged.

Other works attacked abuses and the papacy. Luther admitted that his language had sometimes been more severe than was

appropriate, but he would not retract the substance merely because his manner had been harsh.

A third category consisted of writings directed against particular individuals who defended what Luther regarded as tyranny and false teaching.

Again, Luther acknowledged that he could have written with greater Christian moderation.

But the central question remained.

Could he retract his teaching simply because he had been commanded to do so?

His answer was no.

Convinced by Scripture

Luther's response reached its decisive point when he stated that unless he were convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by evident reason, he could not retract.

He would not accept the authority of popes and councils as sufficient in itself, because, he argued, they had contradicted one another and had erred.

His conscience was bound by the Word of God.

This was the culmination of the question that had been developing since the indulgence controversy.

In 1517 Luther had questioned a particular practice.

At Leipzig he had been forced to consider whether councils could err.

Now at Worms he publicly stated the principle to which that development had led him.

Neither pope nor council possessed an authority capable of compelling him to deny what he believed Scripture taught.

He would have to be convinced from Scripture.

"Here I Stand"

The words most famously associated with Luther at Worms are:

"Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

They have become almost inseparable from the story of the Reformation.

There is, however, a historical difficulty.

The earliest records of Luther's speech do not all contain the words "Here I stand; I can do no other." The phrase appears in later

versions of the account, and historians therefore debate whether Luther actually uttered it in precisely that form.

This is a useful example of the method we are adopting throughout Understanding Luther.

A famous quotation should not be accepted merely because it has been repeated many times.

The documented substance of Luther's declaration is powerful enough without embellishment.

He stated that his conscience was captive to the Word of God and that it was neither safe nor right to act against conscience.

That is the historically important point.

Whether or not the famous words "Here I stand" were spoken exactly as later tradition records them, they accurately express the position Luther took.

But the distinction between the documented statement and the later familiar formulation should be maintained.

What Did Luther Mean by Conscience?

The word conscience can also be misunderstood.

Modern readers sometimes interpret Luther's declaration as though he were asserting the absolute right of the individual to believe whatever he chooses.

That was not his argument.

Luther did not say:

My conscience tells me that I am right, therefore nobody may question me.

His claim was much more restrictive.

His conscience was bound.

And what bound it was the Word of God.

This distinction is fundamental.

Luther was not asserting the supremacy of personal opinion over all external authority.

He was asserting the supremacy of divine revelation over human authority.

If Scripture demonstrated that Luther was wrong, Luther claimed that he must submit.

The issue therefore remained:

What has God said?

Scripture and Right Reason

Luther's reference to Scripture or evident reason also deserves attention.

He was not setting autonomous human reason alongside Scripture as an equal source of revelation.

Rather, he was refusing to accept assertions merely because an authority pronounced them.

Arguments had to be demonstrated.

Contradictions could be exposed.

Evidence mattered.

Luther could be persuaded, but persuasion required more than the command:

The Church has spoken; therefore retract.

This insistence upon demonstration would become an important feature of Protestant controversy.

Was Luther Claiming That Only His Interpretation Was Correct?

Luther's position immediately raises a difficult question.

Suppose two men both appeal to Scripture and reach different conclusions.

Who decides between them?

This problem did not disappear merely because Luther rejected the final authority of Rome.

Indeed, it would become increasingly evident as the Reformation developed. Luther himself would later disagree sharply with other Reformers who also claimed biblical authority.

The controversy concerning the Lord's Supper would demonstrate this particularly clearly.

Therefore, sola Scriptura does not eliminate the need for interpretation.

Nor does it guarantee that every person appealing to Scripture will interpret it correctly.

The principle concerns where final authority resides, not whether interpreters are infallible.

This distinction will become important later in this book.

The Word Above the Teacher

There is also an important consequence for our own study of Luther.

If Luther was correct to insist that pope and council must be tested by Scripture, then Luther must be tested by Scripture as well.

We cannot consistently admire Luther for refusing unquestioning submission to human authority and then treat Luther himself as an unquestionable authority.

His principle turns upon him.

The question throughout this book must therefore remain:

Does Luther's teaching faithfully express the teaching of Holy Scripture?

His courage at Worms does not prove every theological conclusion he subsequently reached.

It establishes instead the standard by which he himself asked to be judged.

The Emperor's Response

Charles V was not persuaded.

For the emperor, Luther's willingness to stand against the established teaching of the Church represented a grave danger.

Charles remained committed to the traditional faith and regarded Luther as a heretic.

Nevertheless, the promised safe conduct initially protected Luther.

He was permitted to leave Worms.

Shortly afterwards, however, the Edict of Worms declared him an outlaw. His writings were prohibited, and it became unlawful to shelter or assist him.

Luther was now in serious danger.

Then something extraordinary happened.

Luther Disappears

While returning towards Wittenberg, Luther was intercepted by armed men and taken away.

To those who did not know what had happened, it appeared that he had been kidnapped.

In reality the action had been arranged for his protection.

Frederick the Wise had Luther taken secretly to Wartburg Castle.

There Luther lived under an assumed identity, sometimes referred to as Junker Jörg—Knight George.

The condemned monk had disappeared from public view.

But he did not stop working.

The New Testament in German

At the Wartburg, Luther undertook one of the most important projects of his life.

He translated the New Testament into German.

German translations of biblical material existed before Luther, so it would be incorrect to say that he was the first person to translate the Bible into German.

What distinguished Luther's work was its combination of attention to the original Greek, vigorous contemporary German and the extraordinary opportunities provided by printing.

His New Testament appeared in 1522.

Luther wanted ordinary people to hear Scripture in language they could understand.

His translation would exert a profound influence not only upon German Christianity but upon the development of the German language itself.

Here again we see the practical consequence of his doctrine of authority.

If Scripture was the supreme authority for Christian doctrine, Christians needed access to Scripture.

The Bible could not remain the possession of scholars and clergy alone.

The Reformation Continues Without Luther

While Luther was hidden at the Wartburg, events at Wittenberg continued.

Reform began moving more rapidly, and some changes went further or proceeded more violently than Luther considered wise.

Andreas Karlstadt became associated with more radical reforms.

Questions arose concerning worship, images, the Mass, monastic vows and other established practices.

Luther became concerned that reform carried out without proper teaching could replace one form of bondage with another.

This reveals an important aspect of his character.

Although Luther could be extraordinarily forceful in controversy, he did not believe that genuine Christian reform could simply be imposed through violence.

The Word had to persuade.

Faith could not be created by force.

Returning to Wittenberg

In March 1522 Luther left the Wartburg and returned to Wittenberg despite the dangers associated with his outlawed status.

He preached a series of sermons commonly known as the Invocavit Sermons.

His purpose was to restore order and explain how reform should proceed.

Luther insisted that abuses should certainly be corrected, but he distinguished between what Christians were free to change and what could legitimately be forced upon another person's conscience.

The Gospel must work through the Word.

This is an important development in understanding Luther.

The man who had refused to allow Rome to compel his conscience now faced the question of whether Reformers themselves should compel the consciences of others.

The principle of Christian liberty would become increasingly important.

A New Stage

The Diet of Worms marked the end of one stage of Luther's development and the beginning of another.

The question of authority had now been stated publicly and unmistakably.

Luther would not retract merely because pope, council or emperor commanded him to do so.

His conscience was bound to the Word of God.

But the consequences of that principle were only beginning to unfold.

If Scripture stood above ecclesiastical tradition, then the doctrines of the Church had to be examined afresh.

If justification was by faith, the relationship between faith and works required careful explanation.

If Christians were free from attempts to earn salvation through

religious works, what did Christian liberty mean?

If the authority of Rome were rejected, what constituted the true Church?

And if salvation depended upon God's grace, what part did the human will play in receiving it?

These questions would increasingly occupy Luther during the years following Worms.

One of them would eventually bring him into conflict with the most celebrated humanist scholar in Europe:

Desiderius Erasmus.

But before we reach that controversy, we need to understand the principal doctrines that shaped Luther's thinking.

The historical foundation has now been laid.

We therefore move from the making of Martin Luther to understanding Luther's theology.

PART TWO

UNDERSTANDING LUTHER'S THEOLOGY

The events considered in Part One explain how Martin Luther moved from the monastery and university lecture hall into open conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities of his day.

But history alone cannot explain the Reformation.

Behind the indulgence controversy, the Leipzig Debate and the Diet of Worms lay theological convictions that Luther believed arose from Holy Scripture. His dispute with Rome was not simply a struggle over institutional authority. It concerned the nature of God, the condition of fallen man, the meaning of grace, the work of Christ, justification, faith and the means by which a sinner is reconciled to God.

Before turning in detail to The Bondage of the Will, we therefore need to understand these principal features of Luther's theology.

This is particularly important because theological terms can easily be used without being understood. Words such as grace, faith, justification, election, Law, Gospel, and free will did not function for Luther as isolated theological expressions. They belonged together.

His understanding of one affected his understanding of the others.

At the foundation stood the question we encountered at Worms:

By what authority are these doctrines to be determined?

For Luther, the final answer could not be pope, council, theological tradition or Luther himself.

It must be the Word of God.

CHAPTER 7

Scripture and Authority

When Martin Luther stood before the Diet of Worms in 1521 and refused to retract unless he were convinced by Scripture or evident reason, he was expressing a principle that had developed through several years of controversy.

His conscience, he said, was captive to the Word of God.

That statement has become one of the defining expressions of the Protestant Reformation.

Yet the principle needs careful explanation.

Luther was not claiming that Christian history possessed no value. He did not reject every theologian who had lived before him. He did not believe that the Church was unnecessary. Nor did he imagine that every individual interpretation of Scripture must be correct merely because someone claimed to have found it in the Bible.

The question was more precise:

What possesses final authority when Christian doctrine is disputed?

Luther's answer was increasingly clear.

Holy Scripture.

The Scriptures as the Word of God

Luther's doctrine of Scripture began with the conviction that the biblical writings are not merely human reflections about God.

God speaks through them.

This is why Scripture could exercise authority over pope, council, theologian and individual Christian alike.

If the Bible were merely one religious authority among several, the dispute concerning Rome could ultimately have been settled by determining which institution possessed the greater historical power.

But if Scripture is God's Word, the order is reversed.

The Church stands under the Word.

The Word does not stand under the Church.

This distinction became fundamental to Luther's understanding of reform.

Did the Church Give Us the Bible?

One objection naturally followed.

If the Church recognised the books of Scripture and preserved them through history, did this not mean that the authority of Scripture depended upon the authority of the Church?

Luther's developing position rejected that conclusion.

To recognise an authority is not necessarily to create that authority.

A king's messenger does not make the king's words authoritative by delivering them. He recognises and communicates an authority that already exists.

Likewise, the Church receives the Word of God; it does not make that Word divine.

This distinction is crucial.

If Scripture derived its authority from the Church, the Church would logically stand above Scripture.

But if Scripture possesses authority because God is its author, the Church is called to hear, receive and obey it.

The Church is therefore a servant of the Word rather than its master.

Scripture and the Apostolic Witness

For Luther, the authority of the New Testament was inseparably connected with its testimony to Christ.

The apostles were not simply later religious commentators upon Jesus. They were appointed witnesses of Christ and His Gospel.

The Church therefore did not possess liberty to invent a new Gospel or alter the apostolic message.

Paul's warning to the Galatians was uncompromising:

> *"But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed."*

— Galatians 1:8

Notice the force of Paul's argument.

Even an apostle could not legitimately return later with a different Gospel.

The message already delivered governed the messenger.

This principle helps explain why Luther increasingly regarded the apostolic Scriptures as the standard by which later ecclesiastical claims must be judged.

What Is Sola Scriptura?

The Reformation principle is commonly expressed by the Latin phrase sola Scriptura, meaning Scripture alone.

This can easily be misunderstood.

It does not mean:

Only the Bible may ever be read.

Nor does it mean:

Church history is worthless.

Nor:

Creeds and confessions have no legitimate use.

Nor:

Every Christian interpretation is equally valid.

The principle concerns supreme and final authority.

Church teachers may instruct.

Creeds may summarise doctrine.

Confessions may state what churches believe Scripture teaches.

Councils may deliberate upon controversy.

Historical theologians may provide valuable assistance.

But none of these authorities is equal to the inspired Word of God.

They are subordinate authorities.

Their teaching must itself be tested by Scripture.

Luther and the Church Fathers

Luther's own practice demonstrates this.

He did not ignore the early Christian writers.

He frequently appealed to Augustine, whose writings concerning grace and the human will were particularly important to him. He referred to other Fathers and participated extensively in arguments

concerning the historical teaching of the Church.

But Luther did not regard Augustine as infallible.

This is particularly significant for Understanding Luther.

Just as Luther could value Augustine without believing Augustine incapable of error, we can value Luther without treating Luther as incapable of error.

The principle works in both directions.

No post-apostolic theologian becomes the standard by which Scripture is judged.

Popes Can Err

The indulgence controversy forced Luther to consider the authority of the pope.

Initially he had hoped that abuses might be corrected by properly informed ecclesiastical authority.

But the controversy increasingly confronted him with a more difficult possibility.

What if the pope himself approved something Luther believed contrary to Scripture?

Could papal authority settle the matter merely by speaking?

Luther increasingly answered no.

The pope was a man.

As such, he could err.

This was a profound challenge to the authority claimed by Rome, but Luther's reasoning was straightforward.

If a pope taught contrary to Scripture, the Christian could not be required to believe the pope rather than God.

Councils Can Err

The Leipzig Debate forced the same question concerning Church councils.

Johann Eck connected Luther's teaching with propositions associated with Jan Hus, who had been condemned at the Council of Constance.

When Luther concluded that some propositions attributed to Hus were genuinely Christian, the consequence was unavoidable.

A council had condemned something that Luther believed true.

Therefore councils could err.

Again, this did not mean councils were useless.

It meant they were not infallible merely because they were councils.

Their decisions had to be examined in light of Scripture.

Tradition

The question of tradition requires similar care.

Christianity did not begin in the sixteenth century.

Luther knew this perfectly well.

The Church possessed centuries of preaching, theological reflection, creeds, liturgical practice and biblical interpretation.

Luther did not believe that all of this should simply be discarded.

The question was whether tradition could establish a doctrine that contradicted Scripture or lacked sufficient biblical warrant.

For Luther, tradition could serve the Church.

It could not rule over God's Word.

A practice could not be made true merely by being old.

Error does not become truth through longevity.

At the same time, novelty was not automatically truth merely because someone claimed to have discovered it in Scripture.

Both inherited teaching and new interpretation required examination.

The Problem of Interpretation

At this point a serious difficulty arises.

If Scripture is the final authority, what happens when Christians disagree about what Scripture means?

Luther experienced this problem personally.

He appealed to Scripture against Rome.

But other Reformers also appealed to Scripture and disagreed with Luther.

The controversy concerning the Lord's Supper provides an obvious example. Luther and Huldrych Zwingli both professed biblical authority yet reached sharply different conclusions concerning Christ's words:

"This is my body."

Appealing to Scripture therefore does not eliminate the problem of interpretation.

Two interpreters can both claim biblical support and one—or

both—may be wrong.

Sola Scriptura does not mean infallible interpretation.

It means that the dispute must finally be resolved by determining what Scripture actually teaches rather than by appealing to an authority supposedly standing above Scripture.

Scripture Interprets Scripture

One important principle in Protestant biblical interpretation is that Scripture interprets Scripture.

A difficult passage should not ordinarily be isolated from the clearer teaching of the Bible as a whole.

Words must be understood in context.

Doctrines should not be established upon ambiguous expressions while clearer passages are ignored.

This becomes particularly important when we reach The Bondage of the Will.

Luther and Erasmus both appealed to biblical passages.

The question is therefore not merely:

Who quoted more Scripture?

It is:

Who interpreted those Scriptures correctly and consistently with the biblical testimony as a whole?

That is the question we must ask as readers.

Christ at the Centre

For Luther, Scripture possessed not only divine authority but a central subject.

That subject was Christ.

Luther's biblical interpretation was strongly Christ-centred. He believed Scripture ultimately testified to God's saving work in Christ.

This helps explain his particular appreciation of books such as Romans, Galatians and the Gospel of John, where he found the doctrines of Christ, faith and justification expressed with particular clarity.

It also contributed to some of Luther's more controversial judgments concerning individual biblical books.

Luther and the Canon

A fair account of Luther's doctrine of Scripture must acknowledge

that his comments concerning certain biblical books have caused considerable discussion.

He expressed reservations about James, particularly because he believed its language concerning faith and works could be misunderstood in relation to Paul's teaching on justification.

He also treated Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation differently in the arrangement and discussion of New Testament books.

Luther's famous description of James as an "epistle of straw" is frequently quoted.

Here again context matters.

Luther did not simply remove James from his German Bible. Nevertheless, his judgments demonstrate that his understanding of the relative theological value and apostolic character of certain books was not identical to the way many Protestants today speak about the canon.

This is an area where we must allow Luther to be Luther rather than reconstructing him according to later Protestant assumptions.

And, according to the principle Luther himself advocated, Luther's judgments concerning Scripture must themselves be examined rather than accepted merely because Luther made them.

The Authority of Scripture and the Authority of Luther

This brings us to an important principle for the whole of this companion volume.

Luther's doctrine of biblical authority prevents us from turning Luther himself into an authority equivalent to Scripture.

When we later examine his teaching concerning the human will, predestination, baptism, the Lord's Supper or other doctrines, the fact that Luther taught something will not settle the question.

Nor should it.

If Luther had demanded that Christians accept his teaching merely because Martin Luther had spoken, he would have contradicted his own stand at Worms.

Instead, we must ask:

What Scriptures does Luther appeal to?

What do those Scriptures actually say?

Is his interpretation consistent with their context?

Does it agree with the wider testimony of Scripture?

Those questions honour Luther's stated principle more faithfully than uncritical agreement with him would.

The Open Bible

One of the most enduring images of the Reformation is therefore not Luther himself but the open Bible.

Luther's German translation helped place Scripture into the hands and language of ordinary people.

Preaching increasingly centred upon the exposition of biblical texts.

Doctrine was subjected afresh to biblical examination.

This did not end theological controversy.

In some respects it intensified it.

Once every doctrine was open to examination by Scripture, questions that had appeared settled could be raised again.

But for Luther that was a necessary consequence of recognising the Word of God as supreme.

The Church must always remain under that Word.

The Standard for Understanding Luther

This principle will also govern the chapters that follow.

We are seeking first to understand Luther accurately.

We shall not deliberately make him sound more Reformed, more Lutheran, more Catholic or more modern than his own writings warrant.

But understanding is not the same as agreement.

After determining what Luther taught, we must still ask whether his teaching stands the test of Scripture.

That distinction becomes especially important in the next subjects we must consider.

For Luther's doctrine of salvation begins with a deeply serious assessment of the human condition.

Before asking what grace accomplishes, or whether man's will is free, we must first ask:

What happened to mankind in the Fall?

That question takes us directly towards the theological foundation of The Bondage of the Will.

CHAPTER 8

The Fall and the Condition of Man

Before we can understand Luther's teaching concerning the bondage of the will, we must understand what he believed had happened to mankind in the Fall.

This is fundamental.

The controversy between Luther and Erasmus was not primarily about whether human beings make choices. Luther plainly recognised that men choose between alternatives every day. They decide where to go, what to eat, what work to undertake and innumerable other matters.

The theological question was much more specific:

What ability does fallen man possess in relation to God and his own salvation?

Can a sinner, by the natural power of his will, turn himself towards God?

Can he prepare himself to receive grace?

Can he choose to believe while another man presented with the same Gospel chooses not to believe?

Does fallen man retain some spiritual ability by which he cooperates with God in bringing about his salvation?

Luther's answer to these questions arose from his understanding of the Fall.

If we misunderstand his doctrine of fallen man, we shall almost certainly misunderstand The Bondage of the Will.

Man as God Created Him

The biblical account begins not with fallen man but with man as God originally created him.

Genesis declares:

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."

— Genesis 1:27

Man was not created sinful.

God pronounced His creation "very good."

Adam was created as a rational and moral creature, responsible

before God and capable of obeying the command God gave him.

This distinction is important because Luther's doctrine of the bondage of the will does not mean that the human will was evil simply because it was human.

The bondage followed the Fall.

The problem is not human nature as it originally came from the hand of God.

It is fallen human nature.

The Command Given to Adam

God placed Adam in the garden and gave him a command:

"Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it."

— Genesis 2:16–17

Adam therefore stood under the authority of God.

He was a creature, not an autonomous being.

His life and blessedness depended upon God, and obedience to God's command expressed the proper relationship between Creator and creature.

The serpent's temptation challenged precisely this relationship.

"Ye shall be as gods."

— Genesis 3:5

The temptation offered independence from the Word and authority of God.

Adam and Eve disobeyed.

The consequences extended far beyond the eating of forbidden fruit.

What Changed at the Fall?

Immediately after their sin, Adam and Eve hid themselves from God.

Something fundamental had changed.

They had not ceased to be human beings.

They still possessed minds.

They still exercised wills.

They still made choices.

But their relationship with God was broken.

Shame, fear, guilt and death entered human experience.

God had warned Adam:

"For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."

— Genesis 2:17

Yet Adam did not physically collapse dead at the moment he ate.

This points us towards a broader biblical understanding of death.

Physical death certainly followed the Fall, but alienation from God was already present.

The man who had enjoyed fellowship with his Creator now hid from Him.

This spiritual condition is crucial to Luther's argument.

Adam and His Descendants

The effects of Adam's sin did not end with Adam.

Paul writes:

"Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."

— Romans 5:12

Adam therefore occupies a unique place in the biblical account of mankind.

Through one man sin entered the world.

Death followed sin.

And death passed upon all men.

Paul develops the contrast between Adam and Christ throughout Romans 5.

By the offence of one came condemnation; through the obedience of another comes justification.

For Luther, this meant that mankind's problem could not be understood merely as the accumulation of bad choices made independently by otherwise spiritually neutral individuals.

Humanity is fallen in Adam.

Original Sin

The expression original sin is used to describe this fallen condition inherited from Adam.

It does not mean merely that Adam committed the first sin.

It concerns the corruption of human nature resulting from the Fall.

Luther's understanding of original sin was particularly strong.

Sin was not simply a collection of outward acts that could be removed one at a time until an essentially healthy human nature remained.

The corruption went deeper.

The sinner does not merely commit sins.

He is sinful.

This distinction helps explain Luther's earlier difficulties in the monastery.

He could confess particular sins.

But what could he do when he recognised that the problem reached into his desires, motives and very nature?

Confessing a list of individual offences could not transform the heart from which those offences arose.

"There Is None Righteous"

Paul's argument in Romans 3 became especially important.

He writes:

> *"There is none righteous, no, not one:*
>
> *There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God."*
>
> — Romans 3:10–11

These words leave little room for a flattering view of fallen mankind.

Paul does not say that very few seek God.

He says:

"There is none that seeketh after God."

This became highly significant in the later free-will controversy.

If fallen man naturally possesses the spiritual ability and inclination to turn himself towards God, how should Paul's statement be understood?

Luther would insist that man's natural religious activity must not be confused with a genuine spiritual seeking after the true God.

Human beings can be extremely religious while remaining alienated from God.

Luther's own monastic experience provided a striking example.

He had been intensely religious.

Yet he came to believe that religious effort could not reconcile him to God.

The Mind of the Flesh

Paul writes elsewhere:

"Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be."

— Romans 8:7

Notice the strength of the language.

Paul does not merely say that the carnal mind does not submit to God's law.

He adds:

"neither indeed can be."

For Luther, this distinction between will not and cannot was crucial.

Fallen man's inability does not mean that he desires God sincerely but is prevented by some external force from coming.

His inability is bound up with what he is and therefore with what he wants.

His will operates according to his fallen nature.

This is very different from imagining a man desperately wishing to come to Christ while God refuses to allow him.

The biblical problem is that fallen man does not naturally desire God as God.

Dead in Sins

Paul uses still stronger language in Ephesians:

"And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins."

— Ephesians 2:1

Again, the nature of the description matters.

Paul does not describe fallen man merely as sick, weak or spiritually disadvantaged.

He describes him as dead in trespasses and sins.

The passage continues by describing people walking according to the course of this world and fulfilling the desires of the flesh and mind.

This shows that spiritual death does not mean physical inactivity.

Spiritually dead men remain extremely active.

They think.

They choose.

They work.

They love.

They hate.

They build societies.

They practise religion.

What they cannot do by their natural power is produce the spiritual life from which true faith in God arises.

Life must come from God.

This is why the biblical language of quickening—making alive—became so important in doctrines of grace.

Does Fallen Man Still Have a Will?

Yes.

This point must be emphasised because the expression bondage of the will can easily be misunderstood.

Luther did not argue that fallen human beings cease to possess wills.

Nor did he teach that men are unconscious objects moved about against their desires.

Men choose.

They act intentionally.

They pursue what they desire.

They are therefore responsible for what they do.

The bondage concerns the moral and spiritual condition of the will.

A fallen man possesses a fallen will.

The problem is not the absence of choice.

The problem is the nature from which those choices arise.

The Tree and Its Fruit

The principle can be illustrated by Christ's words concerning a tree and its fruit:

"A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit."

— Matthew 7:18

The fruit reveals the nature of the tree.

The tree does not become corrupt because it happened to produce one bad fruit. Bad fruit proceeds from a corrupt tree.

Likewise, Luther increasingly understood sinful actions as expressions of a deeper corruption.

This is why merely reforming outward behaviour could never provide the answer to man's spiritual condition.

The tree itself needed to be made good.

"No Man Can Come to Me"

One of the most important statements for the later controversy appears in the Gospel of John.

Christ declares:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

— John 6:44

Again, the language concerns ability.

Christ does not merely say:

No man will come.

He says:

"No man can come."

The exception is divine action:

"except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

This verse goes directly to the heart of the dispute concerning free will.

If fallen man possesses within himself the spiritual ability to come to Christ, why does Christ say that no man can come unless the Father draws him?

Luther would later use passages of this kind to argue that salvation must begin with God rather than man's independent decision.

Willing and Coming

Yet Scripture also speaks of man's unwillingness.

Christ says:

"And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life."

— John 5:40

Here the problem is not presented merely as inability.

It is unwillingness.

The two ideas should not be set against one another.

Fallen man's inability is a moral inability.

He cannot come because, left to himself, he will not come.

His will is not morally neutral, standing independently between God and sin and capable of moving itself in either direction.

It is the will of a fallen creature.

This is why divine grace must do more than simply present an opportunity.

It must change the sinner.

Responsibility and Inability

At this point a difficult question naturally arises.

If fallen man cannot turn himself towards God, how can God hold him responsible?

This question lies near the centre of The Bondage of the Will and will require much fuller treatment later.

For the moment, we should notice that Scripture itself places human responsibility and human inability alongside one another.

Christ could say:

"Ye will not come to me."

and also:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

Man is responsible because his unbelief proceeds willingly from his own fallen heart.

His inability does not arise because God created him innocent but refused him some faculty necessary for obedience.

Humanity fell in Adam.

The bondage is the consequence of sin, not a defect in God's original creation.

Why Grace Must Be Grace

We can now begin to see why Luther's doctrine of the Fall was so

important to his doctrine of grace.

If fallen man retains sufficient spiritual ability to begin his own return to God, grace may be understood principally as assistance.

Man takes the first step; grace helps him complete the journey.

But if fallen man is spiritually dead, hostile to God and unable to come to Christ unless drawn by the Father, something much greater is required.

God must act.

The sinner must be made alive.

The heart must be changed.

Faith itself cannot become a work by which fallen man distinguishes himself before God.

Salvation must be of grace.

Paul writes:

> *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:*
>
> *Not of works, lest any man should boast."*
>
> — Ephesians 2:8–9

For Luther, this exclusion of boasting was fundamental.

If the decisive difference between the saved and the lost ultimately lay in an independent spiritual decision produced by one man's free will but not another's, Luther believed that something had been attributed to man which Scripture attributes to grace.

The Foundation of the Controversy

We are now in a position to understand why Luther regarded the dispute with Erasmus as so important.

The question of free will could not be separated from the doctrine of man.

If mankind is only partially impaired by the Fall, then some independent spiritual ability might remain.

If mankind is spiritually dead and enslaved to sin, salvation must begin with divine intervention.

The argument therefore proceeds in a logical order:

What was man when God created him?

What happened in the Fall?

What is fallen man's condition before God?

What can such a man do towards his own salvation?

Only after answering these questions can we ask meaningfully whether his will is spiritually free.

A Necessary Distinction

We should finish by making a distinction that will become increasingly important.

Luther was not denying natural human freedom in ordinary earthly affairs.

A man can decide whether to marry, practise a trade, buy property, eat or fast, travel or remain at home.

The controversy concerns man's ability in relation to God and salvation.

Can fallen man, without the prior work of divine grace, produce saving faith?

Can he turn his hostile heart towards God?

Can spiritual death generate spiritual life?

Luther's answer was emphatically no.

That conclusion leads directly to the subject from which his famous work takes its name.

If fallen man still possesses a will, but that will cannot by its own power turn itself towards God, in what sense is it bound?

And what exactly did Luther mean by free will?

That is our next question.

CHAPTER 9

The Human Will

Few expressions associated with Martin Luther are more easily misunderstood than "the bondage of the will."

The title can give the impression that Luther denied human beings possess wills at all, or that he regarded men as passive objects compelled to act contrary to their own desires.

That was not his argument.

Luther knew perfectly well that human beings make choices. Men reason, desire, decide and act. They choose occupations, marry, raise families, conduct business, obey or disobey laws, and make countless decisions throughout their lives.

The controversy concerned something much more specific.

The question was:

Does fallen man possess freedom of will in spiritual things, so that by his own natural power he can turn himself towards God, choose Christ, believe the Gospel, or contribute something towards his own salvation?

Luther's answer was no.

To understand why, we must distinguish carefully between will, freedom, ability, necessity and compulsion.

These distinctions lie at the heart of The Bondage of the Will.

Man Possesses a Will

Luther did not deny that man wills.

A human being is not a stone.

A stone does not consider alternatives and decide what it wants to do. A human being does.

Neither did Luther believe that the Fall destroyed man's faculties of thought and choice.

Fallen men continue to reason and make genuine decisions.

When a man sins, therefore, he ordinarily sins because he wants to do what he does.

This is essential to human responsibility.

The bondage of the will does not mean that the sinner desperately wishes to love God while some external force prevents him.

His problem lies deeper.

His desires themselves are affected by his fallen nature.

Freedom in Earthly Things

Luther was prepared to speak of a form of human freedom in matters belonging to ordinary earthly life.

A person can make decisions concerning property, employment, family and civil affairs. He can choose between different courses of outward conduct.

A man may decide whether to cultivate a field.

He may choose one trade rather than another.

He may give money to the poor or retain it.

He may attend church or remain at home.

Such choices are real.

Therefore, when Luther denies free will, we must not make him

say more than he intended.

His principal concern is not whether man possesses any freedom whatsoever.

It is whether man possesses spiritual freedom before God.

Can the natural man, without the prior work of God's grace, turn himself towards God and produce the faith by which he is saved?

That is the disputed question.

The Will Is Not Independent of the Nature

Why does a person choose what he chooses?

Luther's answer cannot be understood if the will is imagined as an independent faculty standing above the person's nature.

The will belongs to the person.

A righteous nature desires according to that nature.

A fallen nature desires according to its nature.

Christ used the illustration of a tree:

> *"A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit."*
>
> — Matthew 7:18

The fruit proceeds from the tree.

In the same way, human choices reveal the character of the heart from which they proceed.

The solution to man's spiritual problem therefore cannot consist merely in telling the corrupt tree to produce different fruit.

The tree itself must be changed.

The Heart and the Will

Scripture repeatedly connects human actions with the heart.

Christ teaches:

> *"For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders."*
>
> — Mark 7:21

The outward act therefore proceeds from something inward.

This is why the biblical doctrine of regeneration concerns more than behaviour.

Man requires a new heart.

God's promise through Ezekiel expresses the principle:

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."

— Ezekiel 36:26

Notice who acts in the promise.

God says:

"I will give."

"I will put."

The transformation begins with God.

This fits directly with Luther's understanding of grace.

Willing but Unable

A distinction must now be made between physical inability and moral inability.

Suppose a man is physically imprisoned. He wishes to leave the room but the door is locked.

He is unable to leave even though he genuinely wants to leave.

That is not what Luther means by man's inability to come to God.

The sinner's inability is bound up with his unwillingness.

Christ says:

"And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life."

— John 5:40

Yet He also says:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

— John 6:44

The first statement concerns will:

"Ye will not."

The second concerns ability:

"No man can."

The two belong together.

Fallen man cannot come because, left to himself, he does not desire God as God.

His inability is therefore moral and spiritual rather than mechanical.

Necessity Is Not Compulsion

This brings us to one of the most important distinctions in

Luther's argument.

Necessity is not the same thing as compulsion.

If a man were physically forced to perform an action he hated and resisted, that would be compulsion.

But Luther did not picture fallen man as being compelled to sin against his will.

Man sins willingly.

His actions proceed from what he desires.

The necessity arises from the settled character of his fallen nature, not from an external force dragging him unwillingly into sin.

This distinction is vital.

Otherwise the doctrine of bondage would appear to remove responsibility.

Luther's argument is almost the reverse.

Man is responsible precisely because his sinful actions genuinely express what he wills.

Can Man Make Himself Will Differently?

The next question follows naturally.

If the problem lies in man's will, can man simply decide to change his will?

Here Luther believed the free-will argument became circular.

Suppose a fallen man does not desire God.

We tell him:

Choose to desire God.

But what causes him to make that choice?

If his existing fallen will produces the decision to transform itself into a godly will, then the fallen will has already produced a spiritually good movement towards God.

The very ability in dispute has simply been assumed.

For Luther, Scripture places the beginning elsewhere.

God acts upon the sinner.

God calls.

God quickens.

God grants repentance.

God gives faith.

The changed will follows God's gracious action rather than causing it.

"It Is God Which Worketh in You"

Paul writes:

"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

— Philippians 2:13

This verse is particularly relevant because it speaks not only of what believers do, but of what they will.

God works:

"both to will and to do."

Grace therefore does not merely assist an independently produced human willingness.

God works in the will itself.

This does not mean that the believer subsequently acts unwillingly.

Quite the opposite.

God's work produces willing obedience.

Grace does not destroy the will.

It liberates it from its bondage.

The New Birth

The language of the new birth expresses the same priority.

Christ tells Nicodemus:

"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

— John 3:3

A man does not cause his own natural birth.

The imagery therefore emphasises divine initiative.

Likewise John writes concerning those who receive Christ:

"Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

— John 1:13

The words are especially significant for the question before us.

The new birth is expressly distinguished from:

"the will of man."

Its ultimate source is:

"of God."

For Luther, passages such as these made it impossible to assign

the decisive beginning of salvation to man's natural free will.

Does Grace Destroy Human Willing?

No.

This is another important misunderstanding.

When God brings a sinner to faith, Luther does not imagine God dragging an unwilling man into salvation while the man continues desperately to resist Christ.

Grace changes the sinner so that he willingly comes.

The will that previously rejected God is renewed.

The person believes.

The person repents.

The person comes to Christ.

These are genuine human acts.

But Luther's question concerns why they occur.

Does the sinner generate the decisive spiritual movement from within himself?

Or does God's grace produce the change by which the sinner willingly believes?

Luther insists upon the latter.

Faith Is Not Coercion

Saving faith therefore cannot be produced by external force.

This explains Luther's resistance to attempts to compel religious belief by mere political power.

A ruler may restrain outward behaviour.

He may establish civil laws.

He may punish crimes.

But he cannot create faith.

Faith arises through the Word and the work of God.

This conviction helps explain Luther's insistence during the disturbances at Wittenberg that reform should proceed through preaching rather than coercion.

The Word must do its work.

Why Call It "Bondage"?

Why, then, use such a strong word as bondage?

Because Luther believed Scripture itself described fallen man in terms of slavery.

Christ says:

"Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin."

— John 8:34

Paul similarly writes:

"But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you."

— Romans 6:17

The language is not merely that men occasionally choose sin.

They are described as servants of sin.

Freedom therefore requires liberation.

And liberation must come from someone who is not himself enslaved.

For Luther, that liberator is Christ.

Two Different Questions

We can now distinguish two questions that are often confused.

The first is:

Does man possess a will?

Luther answers:

Yes.

The second is:

Is fallen man's will spiritually free to turn itself towards God without God's prior saving grace?

Luther answers:

No.

Much confusion concerning The Bondage of the Will disappears once these questions are separated.

Luther and Erasmus

This distinction also explains why Luther believed Erasmus had not gone deeply enough.

Erasmus wished to preserve some place for human free choice in matters pertaining to salvation.

Luther believed that even a very small independent contribution from man's will undermined the principle of salvation by grace.

If God performs almost everything but the final decisive movement belongs independently to man, Luther would ask:

What ultimately distinguishes the believer from the unbeliever?

If the answer is something originating in the believer's unaided will, then the decisive difference lies in man.

Luther believed Scripture excluded that conclusion.

Paul asks:

"For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?"

— 1 Corinthians 4:7

The question strikes at the heart of human boasting.

If everything spiritually good is received, man cannot claim the decisive cause of his salvation as his own.

What About Human Responsibility?

The objection remains.

If the will is bound, how can man be responsible?

Luther did not regard responsibility as requiring a morally neutral will.

Responsibility arises because the sinner acts voluntarily according to his own desires.

He is not forced to hate God.

He hates willingly.

He is not compelled externally to reject God's Word.

His rejection proceeds from his own heart.

The bondage therefore explains his need for grace without turning him into an innocent victim of circumstances beyond himself.

Nevertheless, the relationship between divine sovereignty, necessity and human responsibility becomes one of the most difficult aspects of Luther's argument.

We shall need to return to it when examining The Bondage of the Will directly.

The Will Made Free

There is an important positive side to Luther's doctrine that can be lost when attention is concentrated entirely upon bondage.

Christ does not merely expose slavery.

He liberates.

Jesus declares:

"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

— John 8:36

True spiritual freedom, therefore, is not independence from God.

It is freedom in relation to God.

The sinner imagines freedom to mean autonomy—the ability to belong entirely to himself.

Biblically, Luther understood true freedom differently.

To be liberated from sin is to become willing in the service of righteousness.

Grace does not make man less human.

It restores him to the proper relationship with his Creator.

Why This Matters for *The Bondage of the Will*

We can now state Luther's position in a concise form.

> **Fallen man possesses a will and makes genuine voluntary choices, but his will is not spiritually neutral. Because his nature is corrupted by sin, he cannot by his own natural power turn himself towards God or produce saving faith. Divine grace must first act upon him, renewing the heart so that he willingly comes to Christ.**

This is what Luther means fundamentally by the bondage of the will.

Whether every aspect of Luther's subsequent argument follows correctly from Scripture must still be examined.

But we must first understand what he is claiming.

He is not denying choice.

He is denying independent spiritual ability.

And that brings us naturally to the other side of the question.

If salvation cannot originate in the will of fallen man, where does it originate?

Luther's answer is unequivocal.

It originates in the grace and sovereign purpose of God.

CHAPTER 10

Grace and the Sovereignty of God

If fallen man cannot by his own natural power turn himself towards God, then the beginning of salvation must be found somewhere other than in the sinner's will.

For Luther, the answer was the grace of God.

Grace was not merely divine assistance offered to a spiritually neutral person who could either begin his own salvation or refuse it. Nor was it simply God's response to some good disposition already present within man.

Grace was necessary precisely because fallen man possessed no spiritual resource by which he could restore himself to God.

This brings us to one of the central convictions underlying Luther's theology:

Salvation begins with God, is accomplished by God in Christ, and is applied to the sinner by the gracious work of God.

The sovereignty of God and the grace of God therefore belong together.

What Is Grace?

The word grace is easily used without considering what it means.

In its most basic theological sense, grace is God's undeserved favour towards those who have no claim upon it.

If something is owed, its payment is not grace.

Paul makes precisely this distinction:

"Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt."

— Romans 4:4

A labourer who receives the wage promised for his work is not receiving a gift. He receives what is due according to the agreement.

Grace operates differently.

The sinner does not present God with sufficient merit and then receive salvation as his reward.

Paul continues:

"But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

— Romans 4:5

The description is striking.

God justifies the ungodly.

The person justified is not presented as someone who has first made himself sufficiently righteous to deserve justification.

Grace comes to the undeserving.

Grace and Human Merit

This was particularly important given Luther's own religious experience.

As a monk he had taken religious discipline seriously. He had prayed, fasted, confessed and attempted to fulfil the obligations of his vocation.

Yet the more carefully he examined himself, the less reason he found for confidence in his own merit.

If salvation depended upon establishing sufficient righteousness before God, Luther could never know whether he had done enough.

His developing understanding of grace reversed the direction.

The question ceased to be:

What can Luther present to God that will make God accept him?

It became:

What has God freely provided for the sinner in Christ?

This change lies at the heart of Luther's understanding of the Gospel.

Grace Is Not God's Reward for Foreseen Goodness

If grace is truly grace, Luther believed it cannot be God's reward for some spiritual virtue which He first discovers in man.

Suppose God looks forward through history, sees that one person will independently choose Christ, and on account of that foreseen decision determines to save him.

The decisive difference between that person and another would then lie ultimately in the human choice God foresaw.

Luther resisted any explanation that appeared to place the originating cause of salvation in man.

Paul writes concerning God's purpose in Jacob and Esau:

> *"For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth."*
>
> — Romans 9:11

Whatever further questions Romans 9 may raise—and there are important questions—we should notice Paul's emphasis:

"not of works, but of him that calleth."

Luther found here a principle consistent with the wider biblical

doctrine of grace.

God's saving purpose originates in God.

God Takes the Initiative

The priority of divine action appears repeatedly in Scripture.

Paul tells the Ephesians:

"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us,

Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ."

— Ephesians 2:4–5

The order is significant.

The sinner is described as dead in sins.

Then:

"God … hath quickened us."

The dead do not first make themselves alive and then ask God to assist them.

Life comes from God.

Likewise, the new birth is attributed to divine action.

John describes believers as those:

"Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

— John 1:13

And James writes:

"Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth."

— James 1:18

For Luther, salvation therefore begins not with the independent will of the sinner but with the gracious will of God.

The Word as the Instrument of Grace

This emphasis upon divine initiative did not lead Luther to disregard the preaching of the Gospel.

Quite the opposite.

God works through His Word.

This is one reason Luther placed such importance upon

preaching, biblical translation and the proclamation of the Gospel.

Paul writes:

"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

— Romans 10:17

The sinner is not instructed to discover saving truth by looking within himself.

The Gospel comes to him from outside.

Christ is proclaimed.

The promise is announced.

Faith receives what God declares.

This is closely connected with Luther's emphasis upon the external Word.

The foundation of faith is not the sinner's emotional state but the promise of God in Christ.

Calling

Scripture frequently speaks of God's calling.

There is an outward proclamation of the Gospel which may be heard by many. Yet Scripture also speaks of God's calling in a way closely connected with salvation.

Paul writes:

"Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified."

— Romans 8:30

The calling described here results in justification.

The same people who are called are said to be justified.

This has led theologians to distinguish between the general call of the Gospel and what is often called the effectual call of God.

The terminology may be later and more systematic than Luther's own manner of expression, but the underlying question is important.

Why does one sinner hear the Gospel and believe while another hears and remains in unbelief?

Can the final explanation be found in an independent spiritual superiority in the believer?

Luther's doctrine of grace would not allow that answer.

Grace and Faith

Does this mean faith is unnecessary?

Certainly not.

Luther's theology is famous precisely for its emphasis upon justification through faith.

But faith must not be transformed into a meritorious work.

Faith does not purchase Christ.

Faith receives Christ.

The distinction is important.

An empty hand does not earn the gift placed into it.

Likewise, Luther understood faith not as a virtue sufficiently excellent to persuade God to justify the believer, but as reliance upon God's promise in Christ.

The merit belongs to Christ.

Faith receives Him.

Why Does One Believe?

Yet the question remains.

If two people hear the same Gospel and one believes while the other rejects it, what accounts for the difference?

If the answer is simply:

One used his free will correctly and the other did not,

Luther believed the decisive distinction had once again been placed in man.

He instead looked to God's gracious action.

Paul asks the Corinthians:

> *"For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?"*
>
> — 1 Corinthians 4:7

If saving faith is something spiritually good which distinguishes the believer from the unbeliever, Luther's reasoning presses the question:

Was it received, or did it originate independently in the believer?

If received, boasting is excluded.

God's Sovereignty

We therefore arrive at the sovereignty of God.

By divine sovereignty we mean that God is not merely one actor within creation competing with other independent powers.

He is Creator and Lord.

The Psalmist declares:

"But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased."

— Psalm 115:3

And Paul writes:

"For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."

— Romans 11:36

For Luther, God's sovereignty was not a peripheral doctrine.

It directly affected salvation.

If God is sovereign and salvation is by grace, then salvation cannot ultimately depend upon an independent human power operating outside God's gracious purpose.

Sovereignty Does Not Mean That God Sins

At this point we must introduce an important safeguard.

To confess God's sovereignty does not mean that God is morally responsible for man's sin.

Scripture consistently affirms God's holiness.

James writes:

"God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man."

— James 1:13

The same passage places sinful desire within man:

"But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed."

— James 1:14

Therefore, any account of divine sovereignty that makes God the author of sin must be examined very carefully.

Luther's own language concerning divine necessity and God's operation can sometimes be extremely strong, particularly in The Bondage of the Will.

When we reach those passages, we must distinguish between affirming God's absolute sovereignty and drawing conclusions that Scripture itself may not warrant.

Understanding Luther does not require us to defend every formulation he used.

God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

Scripture places two truths alongside one another.

God is sovereign.

Man is responsible.

The crucifixion of Christ provides one of the clearest examples.

Peter declares:

> *"Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain."*
>
> — Acts 2:23

The death of Christ occurred according to:

"the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God."

Yet those who crucified Him acted with:

"wicked hands."

Divine purpose did not remove human guilt.

The same event could therefore be included within God's determined purpose while being wickedly performed by responsible men.

This is highly significant for the later questions Luther raises concerning Pharaoh, Judas and divine hardening.

Joseph and His Brothers

The same principle appears in the story of Joseph.

His brothers acted wickedly in selling him.

Yet Joseph later tells them:

> *"But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good."*
>
> — Genesis 50:20

Notice that Joseph does not say merely that God managed to produce something good after their evil plan went wrong.

Two intentions operated in the same event.

The brothers:

"thought evil."

God:

"meant it unto good."

Their evil intention remained theirs.

God's righteous purpose remained His.

The sovereignty of God therefore does not require us to confuse the moral character of God's purpose with the sinful intentions of human agents.

Grace That Actually Saves

Luther's understanding of grace was therefore much stronger than the idea that God merely makes salvation possible.

Christ does not simply place mankind into a neutral condition and wait to see who will independently make the decisive choice.

God saves.

He calls.

He quickens.

He gives.

He draws.

He works in the believer:

"both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

— Philippians 2:13

This does not eliminate faith, repentance or willing obedience.

It explains their source.

Grace produces rather than rewards the sinner's turning to God.

"By the Grace of God I Am What I Am"

Paul's own testimony provides an appropriate summary:

"But by the grace of God I am what I am."

— 1 Corinthians 15:10

Paul does not deny his own activity. In the same verse he speaks of labouring abundantly.

Yet he immediately adds:

"yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."

This captures something central to Luther's understanding.

Grace does not make the believer inactive.

It produces activity.

It does not destroy willing.

It produces a renewed will.

It does not leave the sinner as he was.

It changes him.

And because the source is grace, the glory belongs to God.

A Necessary Caution

At this stage we should resist moving too quickly.

To establish that salvation is entirely dependent upon God's grace does not automatically settle every question concerning predestination, election, reprobation, God's secret will or the precise relationship between sovereignty and human responsibility.

Those questions require their own biblical examination.

Luther sometimes moves from one proposition to another with considerable force, particularly when arguing against Erasmus.

Our task will be to distinguish carefully between:

what Scripture explicitly teaches;

what Luther concludes from it;

and

whether that conclusion necessarily follows.

This is especially important if we are to follow the principle established earlier in this book: Luther must himself be tested by Scripture.

Grace Excludes Boasting

Nevertheless, the central principle is clear.

The biblical doctrine of grace leaves no ground for human boasting.

Paul writes:

"Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace.

And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace."

— Romans 11:5–6

Grace and merit cannot occupy the same place as the ultimate ground of salvation.

If salvation is earned, it is debt.

If it is grace, it is gift.

For Luther, this was not a minor theological distinction.

It concerned the Gospel itself.

From Grace to Justification

We have now followed Luther's reasoning through several connected doctrines.

Man is fallen.

His will is spiritually bound.

He cannot restore himself to God.

God acts in sovereign grace.

But another question immediately follows.

How does this gracious God declare a guilty sinner righteous?

If God is just, He cannot simply pretend that sin does not exist.

If man cannot establish his own righteousness, where is the righteousness by which he stands accepted before God?

This question had tormented Luther during his years in the monastery.

His answer became one of the defining doctrines of the Reformation:

The sinner is justified through faith in Christ.

We therefore turn next to the doctrine with which Luther's name has perhaps become most closely associated.

CHAPTER 11

Justification by Faith

Few doctrines are more closely associated with Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation than justification by faith.

Yet the expression can easily become a slogan whose meaning is assumed rather than understood.

What is justification?

What does faith accomplish?

Does God justify a sinner because faith is itself a sufficiently good work?

What place remains for obedience and good works?

And above all, how can a righteous God declare an unrighteous man righteous without compromising His own justice?

For Luther these were not merely questions for theological debate. They reached back into the spiritual struggle of his years in the monastery.

He had tried to become righteous.

The Gospel taught him that the righteousness he needed could not be produced by his own religious achievements.

It must be found in Christ.

What Does It Mean to Justify?

The first distinction concerns the meaning of justification.

In Scripture, justification is fundamentally a declaration concerning a person's standing before God.

Paul places justification in direct contrast with condemnation:

> *"Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.*
>
> Who is he that condemneth?"
>
> — Romans 8:33–34

To condemn is to pronounce guilty.

To justify is to pronounce righteous.

This distinction matters because justification must not simply be confused with the gradual transformation of the Christian's character.

God certainly changes His people. The Christian is called to holiness and good works. But that work of transformation must be distinguished from the question:

On what ground does God accept the sinner as righteous?

For Luther, confusing these matters threatened the certainty of the Gospel.

If God's acceptance ultimately depended upon the degree of righteousness achieved within him, Luther was driven back to the problem that had troubled him in the monastery:

Have I become righteous enough?

The Ungodly Justified

Paul's language in Romans 4 is striking:

> *"But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."*
>
> — Romans 4:5

God is described as the One:

> **"that justifieth the ungodly."**

This presented Luther with something radically different from

the idea that God waits until the sinner has made himself righteous and then recognises the achievement.

The person being justified is described as ungodly.

Therefore justification cannot mean that God simply observes an already completed moral transformation.

God declares righteous the one who, considered in himself, possesses no righteousness capable of establishing a claim upon God.

How can He do this justly?

The answer lies in Christ.

The Righteousness We Need

Luther's earlier struggle with the expression "the righteousness of God" now becomes particularly important.

He had once heard the words principally as a threat.

God is righteous.

Luther is sinful.

Therefore God's righteousness condemns him.

But as Luther's understanding of the Gospel developed, righteousness was no longer considered merely as something God demanded from the sinner.

The Gospel revealed a righteousness provided by God.

Paul writes:

> *"But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;*
>
> *Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe."*
>
> — Romans 3:21–22

The sinner's hope therefore lies outside himself.

He does not stand before God presenting his own righteousness.

He stands in relation to Christ.

This external character of righteousness became central to Luther's theology.

Christ for Us

The doctrine of justification cannot be separated from the person and work of Jesus Christ.

If God simply declared guilty men righteous without dealing

with their guilt, justification would appear to be an arbitrary fiction.

But the Gospel does not ignore sin.

Christ bears it.

Peter writes:

"Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree."

— 1 Peter 2:24

Paul expresses the exchange with extraordinary force:

"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

— 2 Corinthians 5:21

Christ is without sin.

Yet He bears the sins of His people.

The sinner possesses no righteousness sufficient for acceptance with God.

Yet in Christ he stands righteous.

The ground of justification is therefore not the sinner's achievement.

It is Christ's saving work.

Imputation

This brings us to an important theological term: imputation.

To impute is to reckon or account something to a person.

Paul develops this idea particularly in Romans 4.

Speaking of Abraham, he writes:

"For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness."

— Romans 4:3

Paul then cites David:

"Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin."

— Romans 4:7–8

The language is forensic or judicial.

Something is reckoned, counted, or imputed.

For Luther and later Protestant theology, this provided an

important biblical foundation for understanding justification as God's declaration concerning the believer rather than as God's recognition that the believer has already achieved inherent moral perfection.

Abraham Before Circumcision

Paul's use of Abraham was especially significant.

Abraham was justified before he received circumcision.

Paul asks:

> *"How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision."*
>
> — Romans 4:10

The order matters.

Circumcision did not cause Abraham's justification.

It followed as a sign.

Likewise, Luther argued that works cannot be placed before justification as its meritorious cause.

The justified person will certainly produce works.

But those works follow from faith rather than providing the ground upon which God first accepts him.

What Is Faith?

If justification is through faith, we must ask what Luther meant by faith.

Faith is not merely acknowledging that certain religious statements are factually correct.

A person may believe that Jesus existed historically without entrusting himself to Christ.

Saving faith involves reliance upon the promise of God in Christ.

For Luther, faith possessed a strongly personal character.

It does not merely say:

Christ is a Saviour.

It rests upon the promise:

Christ is the Saviour given for sinners such as me.

Faith therefore looks away from itself.

Its value does not lie in the excellence of faith considered as a human achievement.

Its value lies in Christ, whom faith receives.

Does Faith Merit Justification?

This distinction is crucial.

If Luther merely replaced one meritorious work with another, nothing fundamental would have changed.

Suppose the old question were:

Have I performed enough good works to deserve justification?

and Luther replaced it with:

Have I produced a sufficiently meritorious act of faith to deserve justification?

Faith itself would then become another work.

That was not Luther's argument.

Faith justifies not because faith possesses merit which God rewards, but because faith receives Christ.

The distinction can be expressed simply:

Faith is not the price of justification; it is the means by which Christ is received.

The righteousness remains Christ's.

Faith and the Promise

This explains Luther's emphasis upon the promise of God.

Faith requires an object.

Christian faith is not confidence in confidence.

Nor is it optimism concerning one's spiritual condition.

It rests upon what God has said and what God has accomplished in Christ.

This provided the answer to Luther's earlier introspection.

If assurance depended upon examining the quality of his own repentance, obedience or even faith, Luther could always discover inadequacy.

But God's promise does not fluctuate with Luther's emotions.

The Gospel directs faith outward.

The question becomes not:

How strong is my spiritual performance?

but:

Is the promise of God in Christ true?

Justification by Faith Alone

The Reformation doctrine became associated with another Latin

expression:

sola fide — by faith alone.

The expression does not mean that genuine faith remains alone or produces no change in the believer's life.

It concerns the means of justification.

The sinner is not justified by a combination of:

Christ + faith + sufficient works.

He is justified through faith apart from works as the ground of his acceptance.

Paul writes:

> *"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."*
>
> — Romans 3:28

Luther famously rendered this verse in his German translation with wording equivalent to "justified by faith alone."

This generated controversy because the word alone is not explicitly present in the Greek text at that point.

Luther defended the rendering on the grounds that it expressed the force of Paul's contrast between faith and works.

Whether one approves that particular translational decision or not, Luther's theological point is clear.

Paul excludes works as the ground of justification.

What About James?

This immediately brings us to one of the most difficult questions for Luther's doctrine.

James writes:

> *"Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only."*
>
> — James 2:24

At first sight this appears directly contrary to Paul's statement that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

Luther's difficulties with the Epistle of James are well known, and we should not conceal them.

But before concluding that Paul and James contradict one another, we must examine what each writer is addressing.

Paul asks how an ungodly sinner is declared righteous before

God.

James confronts a professed faith that produces no corresponding works.

James asks:

"What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works?"

— James 2:14

Notice the expression:

"though a man say he hath faith."

The issue is a claim to faith.

James demonstrates that living faith produces fruit.

Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac demonstrated the reality of the faith already attributed to him.

Therefore the two apostles need not be placed in opposition.

Paul rejects works as the ground of justification.

James rejects a dead profession that claims to be faith while producing no works.

Faith That Works

Luther could speak very strongly about the active character of genuine faith.

True faith is not spiritually barren.

Once a person is liberated from the attempt to earn God's acceptance, he is free to serve his neighbour.

This is why The Freedom of a Christian could hold together two apparently contrary propositions: the Christian is free from all as regards justification, yet willingly becomes servant to all in love.

Good works therefore matter enormously.

But their place must be maintained correctly.

They are not the root of justification.

They are its fruit.

A useful distinction is:

We are not justified because our faith produces works; rather, the faith through which we are justified does produce works.

The Place of the Law

Does justification by faith therefore make God's Law unnecessary?

Paul anticipated precisely this objection:

"Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea,

we establish the law."

— Romans 3:31

The Law continues to reveal God's holiness and expose sin.

It shows the sinner his inability to establish his own righteousness.

It also expresses God's righteous will.

What the Law cannot do is justify the guilty sinner through his imperfect obedience.

This distinction leads naturally to another major feature of Luther's theology: the distinction between Law and Gospel, which we shall examine in the next chapter.

Justification and Assurance

Luther's doctrine also transformed the question of assurance.

If acceptance with God depends upon reaching a sufficient degree of personal holiness, the believer's attention continually returns to himself.

Have I done enough?

Have I repented sufficiently?

Is my love pure enough?

Is my obedience complete enough?

If these questions determine the ground of justification, peace remains elusive.

But if justification rests upon Christ, the ground lies outside the believer.

This does not mean Christians never struggle with doubt.

Luther himself certainly did.

Nor does it mean that self-examination has no legitimate place.

It means that the foundation of acceptance before God is not the believer's fluctuating spiritual condition.

It is Christ.

Justification and Sanctification

A further distinction is necessary.

Justification must not be confused with sanctification.

In justification, God declares the believer righteous in relation to Christ.

In sanctification, God works within the believer, producing increasing conformity to Christ.

The first concerns standing.

The second concerns transformation.

They belong together in salvation but must not be confused.

If sanctification becomes the ground of justification, the believer is once again directed towards his own imperfect righteousness as the basis of acceptance.

If justification is separated entirely from sanctification, however, we create the equally serious error of imagining that saving faith leaves a person unchanged.

The New Testament permits neither error.

The Glory Belongs to Christ

Luther's doctrine of justification therefore connects directly with the doctrines considered in the preceding chapters.

If man is fallen, he cannot establish his own righteousness.

If his will is bound, he cannot generate the saving movement towards God independently.

If salvation is by grace, it cannot be earned.

If Christ has accomplished redemption, faith must look to Him rather than to itself.

The entire structure removes boasting from man and directs glory towards Christ.

Paul writes:

"Where is boasting then? It is excluded."

— Romans 3:27

That question captures something essential in Luther's theology.

The Gospel leaves the sinner nothing upon which to boast before God.

He brings no righteousness that places God in his debt.

He receives.

The Central Question

We can therefore summarise Luther's doctrine of justification in this way:

God justifies the ungodly not because they have established a righteousness of their own, but on account of Christ. This righteousness is received through faith apart from works as the ground of acceptance. Genuine faith, however, does not remain barren but produces good works as its fruit.

This distinction between justification and its fruits is essential for understanding Luther.

It also prepares us for another distinction which appears throughout his writings.

How does God's Word address the sinner?

Sometimes Scripture commands, exposes and condemns.

At other times it promises, gives and comforts.

Luther described these two functions under the headings:

Law and Gospel.

And he believed that confusing them could obscure the very doctrine of justification we have just considered.

CHAPTER 12

Law and Gospel

One of the most important distinctions in Martin Luther's theology is the distinction between Law and Gospel.

The terms can initially be misleading.

Luther did not mean simply that the Old Testament is Law while the New Testament is Gospel. Nor did he mean that the Law came from an angry God while the Gospel came from a gracious Christ.

Both Law and Gospel are the Word of the same God.

The distinction concerns the different ways in which God's Word addresses fallen man.

The Law commands.

The Gospel promises.

The Law reveals what God requires and exposes man's failure to fulfil it.

The Gospel declares what God has accomplished for sinners in Christ.

For Luther, confusing these two could obscure the very nature of salvation.

What Is the Law?

The Law expresses the righteous will of God.

Its clearest summary is found in the two great commandments identified by Christ:

> *"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."*

— Matthew 22:37

And:

"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

— Matthew 22:39

There is nothing wrong with these commandments.

The problem lies not in the Law but in fallen man.

God's Law is holy because God is holy.

Paul writes:

"Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good."

— Romans 7:12

The Law therefore reveals something of the character and righteousness of God.

But when that holy Law addresses sinful man, it also exposes what man is.

The Law Reveals Sin

Paul states:

"For by the law is the knowledge of sin."

— Romans 3:20

This became fundamental to Luther's understanding.

The Law can identify the disease.

It cannot itself provide the cure.

Consider the command:

"Thou shalt not covet."

— Romans 7:7

The command reveals that sinful desire is wrong.

But commanding a fallen man not to covet does not itself create a pure heart within him.

Indeed, Paul explains that the commandment brings sin to conscious recognition.

The Law therefore functions like a light shining into a dark room.

The light does not create the dirt.

It reveals what was already there.

The Law Reaches the Heart

This was particularly important for Luther because the Law cannot be reduced to outward behaviour.

A person might avoid murder while harbouring hatred.

He might avoid adultery while cultivating lust.

Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount demonstrates that God's command reaches beyond outward conformity to the condition of the heart.

This destroys the possibility of establishing righteousness before God merely through visible religious performance.

A man may appear outwardly respectable while remaining inwardly corrupt.

The Law asks not merely:

What have you done?

It also exposes:

What are you?

and:

What do you desire?

This helps explain why Luther's monastic discipline could never finally satisfy his conscience.

The more deeply the Law was applied, the deeper the problem appeared.

"By the Deeds of the Law"

Paul's conclusion is uncompromising:

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight."

— Romans 3:20

The reason is not that the Law is defective.

The sinner is defective.

The Law requires righteousness.

But the Law cannot find in fallen man the righteousness it requires.

Therefore, if the sinner attempts to use the Law as the means by which he establishes his justification, the very Law upon which he relies condemns him.

This produces a crucial distinction:

The Law tells us what righteousness requires; it does not pro-

vide the righteousness by which the ungodly are justified.

That righteousness must come from elsewhere.

The Schoolmaster

Paul uses another important image in Galatians:

"Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith."

— Galatians 3:24

The Law therefore performs an important work when it strips away false confidence.

The self-righteous man imagines that he possesses sufficient goodness to stand before God.

The Law exposes the inadequacy of that claim.

It shuts the sinner's mouth.

Paul writes:

"That every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God."

— Romans 3:19

Only when the sinner ceases to plead his own righteousness is he prepared to understand why the Gospel is good news.

What Is the Gospel?

If the Law says:

Do this,

the Gospel announces:

Christ has done what is necessary for sinners.

If the Law reveals guilt, the Gospel announces forgiveness.

If the Law exposes unrighteousness, the Gospel reveals righteousness in Christ.

If the Law condemns, the Gospel proclaims salvation.

The Gospel is therefore not simply an easier law.

This distinction is vital.

If Christianity merely replaced a difficult Old Testament set of commandments with an easier New Testament set, the fundamental problem would remain.

Man would still have to establish his acceptance with God by successful performance.

But the Gospel is news before it is instruction.

It announces an accomplished work.

Paul summarises the Gospel:

"Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;

And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures."

— 1 Corinthians 15:3–4

These are not commands for the sinner to accomplish.

They are declarations concerning what Christ has accomplished.

Promise and Faith

This is why Luther so frequently connected Gospel with promise.

A command requires obedience.

A promise requires faith.

Suppose someone promises to give you something.

You do not fulfil the promise by performing the promised action yourself.

You receive what another has pledged to give.

Likewise, the Gospel presents Christ to the sinner.

Faith receives the promise.

This is why faith itself must not be transformed into a new meritorious work.

Faith does not complete an unfinished work of Christ.

It rests upon Christ's finished work.

"Come Unto Me"

The Gospel directs the burdened sinner away from himself.

Christ says:

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

— Matthew 11:28

For the Luther who had laboured under the burden of establishing his own righteousness, such words had profound significance.

The Gospel does not say:

Make yourself worthy and then come.

The sinner comes because he needs what only Christ can give.

This is why Luther's doctrine of justification and his distinction

between Law and Gospel belong together.

The Law destroys confidence in self.

The Gospel directs faith towards Christ.

The Law Cannot Give Life

Paul makes this point explicitly:

"For if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law."

— Galatians 3:21

The problem is therefore not that God happened to choose an alternative method when salvation by Law would have worked equally well.

The Law cannot give life to fallen sinners.

It can command life.

It can describe righteousness.

It can condemn transgression.

But it cannot regenerate the spiritually dead.

Life must come from God through the Gospel.

Does the Gospel Contain Commands?

At this point we must avoid making the distinction too mechanical.

The New Testament certainly contains commands.

Christ commands repentance.

The apostles command believers to live holy lives.

Likewise, the Old Testament contains gracious promises of salvation.

Therefore Law and Gospel cannot simply be divided according to which Testament contains a passage.

The distinction concerns the function of the Word.

Whenever God confronts man with what righteousness requires, we encounter Law.

Whenever God announces His saving promise in Christ, we encounter Gospel.

Both themes can therefore appear throughout Scripture.

Repent and Believe

What, then, are we to make of the Gospel command:

"Repent ye, and believe the gospel."

— Mark 1:15

Surely repentance and faith are commanded.

Yes.

Luther's distinction does not mean that sinners are never commanded to believe.

The important question is whether the command itself supplies the spiritual ability necessary to fulfil it.

As we saw when considering the human will, God's command establishes man's responsibility. It does not prove man's natural spiritual ability.

The Gospel call therefore goes out to sinners, while the saving response to that call depends upon God's gracious work.

This again brings Law, Gospel and grace into close relationship.

The Christian Still Needs the Law

Another misunderstanding should be avoided.

If a Christian is justified by faith, does he no longer need God's commandments?

Luther did not teach that the justified believer should become lawless.

The Christian remains a creature of God and is called to love God and neighbour.

Indeed, genuine faith produces obedience.

But the believer's relationship to obedience has changed.

He no longer attempts to use obedience as the price of justification.

He obeys because he has been justified, not in order to make God justify him.

That distinction protects both grace and good works.

Works in Their Proper Place

This gives good works their proper dignity.

When works are made the means of purchasing God's acceptance, they become a burden upon the conscience and detract from the sufficiency of Christ.

But when works flow from faith, they become acts of love towards the neighbour.

The Christian no longer asks:

What work can I perform to make God owe me salvation?

He can instead ask:

How may I serve the person God has placed before me?

This was an important aspect of Luther's Christian ethics.

Faith looks towards God.

Love looks towards the neighbour.

The Accusing Law

Luther also understood that Christians continue to experience the accusing force of the Law.

Believers remain conscious of sin.

They do not achieve sinless perfection in this life.

Therefore, if they turn again to their own obedience as the ground of acceptance with God, the Law will again expose their inadequacy.

The Christian must continually be directed back to Christ.

This helps explain why Luther regarded the distinction between Law and Gospel not merely as something useful at conversion but as essential to Christian preaching.

The believer still needs to hear both.

The Law exposes sin.

The Gospel announces Christ.

Bad Preaching Can Confuse the Two

For Luther, preaching becomes spiritually dangerous when Law and Gospel are confused.

One error is to turn Gospel into Law.

Christ is then presented primarily as a new lawgiver who tells sinners what they must achieve in order to make themselves acceptable to God.

The Gospel ceases to be good news and becomes another demand.

The opposite error is to preach Gospel in a way that makes sin appear insignificant.

If there is no meaningful Law, there is no serious understanding of guilt.

And if there is no guilt, the sinner sees little need for Christ's saving work.

Both errors distort the biblical message.

The Law Wounds; the Gospel Heals

Luther sometimes expressed the distinction in vivid pastoral terms.

The Law wounds.

The Gospel heals.

The Law kills.

The Gospel makes alive.

Such expressions arise from Paul's language:

"For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life."

— 2 Corinthians 3:6

They should not be interpreted as though the Law were evil.

The surgeon's instrument may cause pain because it exposes or cuts into what is diseased.

The problem is not the truthfulness of the diagnosis.

The problem is the disease.

The Gospel is precious because it provides what the sinner cannot provide for himself.

Law, Gospel and the Troubled Conscience

Here we return again to Luther's personal experience.

The troubled monk had heard God's demand.

He knew that God required righteousness.

His mistake had been to search within himself for the righteousness capable of satisfying that demand.

The Gospel directed him away from himself towards Christ.

This pastoral dimension should not be lost when studying Luther's theology.

Law and Gospel were not merely categories for organising theological propositions.

They concerned the sinner's conscience before God.

The Law says:

You are guilty.

The Gospel declares:

Christ came to save sinners.

The Law asks for righteousness.

The Gospel presents Christ as the sinner's righteousness.

A Necessary Qualification

As throughout this study, Luther's terminology should not simply be made the final standard.

The expressions Law and Gospel are useful only insofar as they

accurately describe distinctions found in Scripture.

We should therefore avoid forcing every biblical passage artificially into one of two categories or using Luther's terminology to override the particular context of a text.

Scripture itself remains the authority.

The value of Luther's distinction lies in its ability to clarify an important biblical truth:

> **What God requires of the sinner must not be confused with what God provides for the sinner in Christ.**

The first exposes our need.

The second reveals God's remedy.

The Gospel Is Christ

Ultimately, Luther's Gospel was not merely a theological system.

Its centre was a Person.

Christ had fulfilled righteousness.

Christ had borne sin.

Christ had died.

Christ had risen.

Christ was proclaimed to sinners.

Therefore the answer to the accusations of the Law was not found in claiming that the Law had misunderstood the sinner.

The Law's verdict concerning human sin was true.

The answer was that another had acted for the sinner.

Paul writes:

> *"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus."*
>
> — Romans 8:1

The words "in Christ Jesus" are decisive.

The sinner's hope is not that God's Law has ceased to be holy.

His hope is Christ.

From Law and Gospel to the Christian Life

We have now considered several doctrines that form the theological background to The Bondage of the Will:

Man is fallen.

His will is spiritually bound.

Salvation originates in God's grace.

The sinner is justified through faith in Christ rather than by his own works.

The Law exposes sin, while the Gospel proclaims God's saving provision in Christ.

But justification raises an important practical question.

If the Christian no longer performs works in order to earn acceptance with God, what place do works have in the Christian life?

Does justification by faith lead to moral carelessness?

What did Luther mean when he spoke of Christian freedom?

And how can a person be at once entirely free and yet the servant of everyone?

That brings us to one of Luther's most characteristic themes.

CHAPTER 13

Christian Liberty and Good Works

The doctrine of justification by faith immediately raises a practical question.

If the sinner is justified apart from works, what place remains for good works?

If obedience contributes nothing to the believer's justification, why should the Christian obey God at all?

Luther was well aware of this objection. His answer was not to weaken justification by faith by placing works back into the ground of the sinner's acceptance before God. Instead, he insisted upon putting works in their proper place.

Good works do not produce justification.

They follow justification.

The Christian does not perform good works in order to persuade God to accept him. Having been accepted in Christ, he is liberated to serve God and his neighbour without attempting to purchase salvation through his service.

This is the background to one of Luther's most striking statements, found in his 1520 work The Freedom of a Christian:

A Christian is a free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a servant of all, subject to everyone.

At first the two statements appear contradictory.

For Luther, they expressed two sides of Christian liberty.

What Is Christian Liberty?

Christian liberty does not mean that the Christian is free to do whatever he pleases.

Nor does it mean freedom from God's moral authority.

The liberty Luther had in mind begins with freedom from the attempt to establish righteousness before God by works.

The sinner who believes that his eternal acceptance depends upon his own religious performance can never truly rest.

Has he prayed enough?

Has he given enough?

Has he repented sufficiently?

Has he obeyed perfectly enough?

The questions never end because the standard is the righteousness of God.

Luther had experienced this personally in the monastery.

The Gospel gave him an entirely different ground of confidence.

The believer's justification rests upon Christ.

Therefore he is free from the impossible task of attempting to make himself acceptable to God through his own works.

Free from Condemnation

Paul writes:

"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus."

— Romans 8:1

This is the foundation of Christian liberty.

The believer is not free because sin has ceased to matter.

He is free because his condemnation has been dealt with in Christ.

Again Paul writes:

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free."

— Galatians 5:1

Notice the source of the liberty:

"Christ hath made us free."

Christian liberty is therefore not man's declaration of independence from God.

It is a freedom Christ has accomplished for His people.

Freedom from the Curse of the Law

The believer is also free from the condemnation of the Law.

Paul writes:

"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us."

— Galatians 3:13

The Law itself is not evil.

Its condemnation is just because man is sinful.

The Gospel does not solve the problem by abolishing God's righteousness.

Christ bears the curse.

Therefore the believer no longer stands before God attempting to escape condemnation through his own obedience.

His confidence rests upon Christ.

This is liberty.

Not Freedom to Sin

Paul immediately guards against a false understanding of liberty:

"For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another."

— Galatians 5:13

This verse could almost serve as a summary of Luther's argument.

The Christian has been called to liberty.

Yet that liberty does not produce selfishness.

It produces service:

"by love serve one another."

Here we encounter Luther's paradox.

The Christian is free before God from the necessity of earning righteousness through works.

Yet precisely because he is free from that burden, he becomes willing to serve his neighbour.

Why Perform Good Works?

The answer can now be stated clearly.

The Christian does not perform good works in order to become justified.

He performs them because he has been justified.

This reverses the order found in every system of salvation by merit.

The religion of merit says:

Do good, and perhaps God will accept you.

The Gospel says:

In Christ you are accepted; therefore walk in the good works to which God has called you.

Paul expresses this order clearly in Ephesians.

First:

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

Not of works, lest any man should boast."

— Ephesians 2:8–9

Then immediately:

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works."

— Ephesians 2:10

Good works are excluded as the cause of salvation and then immediately included as its consequence.

That order is essential.

Created Unto Good Works

The words "created in Christ Jesus unto good works" are particularly significant.

The Christian life is not spiritually inactive.

Grace does not save a person so that he may continue contentedly in sin.

The same grace that saves brings forth a changed life.

But even here Paul directs attention towards God's action:

"we are his workmanship."

The believer does not recreate himself.

God acts.

The good works that follow therefore provide no ground for

boasting.

They are the fruit of God's gracious work in His people.

The Tree and Its Fruit

The illustration of the tree is again useful.

A tree is not made good because someone ties good fruit onto its branches.

The nature of the tree determines the fruit it produces.

Christ says:

> *"A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit."*
>
> — Matthew 7:18

Luther used this kind of distinction to explain the relationship between faith and works.

Good works do not make a man righteous before God.

Rather, the person who has been brought into a right relationship with God produces good works.

The order cannot safely be reversed.

Faith Is Active

Luther's doctrine of justification by faith has sometimes been caricatured as though faith were merely intellectual agreement followed by an indifferent life.

That does not represent his mature argument.

True faith is living and active.

Because faith receives Christ, it changes the believer's relationship both to God and to other people.

The believer no longer needs to use his neighbour as an opportunity to accumulate religious merit.

He is free simply to love him.

This is one of the most attractive features of Luther's understanding of Christian liberty.

Good works cease to be spiritual currency.

They become acts of service.

The Neighbour

Luther therefore placed considerable emphasis upon the Christian's ordinary responsibilities towards his neighbour.

Christian service is not restricted to explicitly religious acts.

A father caring for his children, a mother serving her household,

a worker performing his occupation faithfully, a ruler administering justice, and a Christian assisting someone in need may all serve God through ordinary vocations.

This challenged the assumption that the monastic life necessarily represented a higher level of Christian holiness than ordinary life.

Luther had himself entered a monastery believing that the monastic vocation offered a particularly serious way of serving God.

His later theology transformed this understanding.

One need not withdraw from ordinary life in order to find works pleasing to God.

Vocation

This contributed to Luther's important understanding of vocation, or calling.

The Christian serves God within the stations and responsibilities in which providence has placed him.

The farmer serves through farming.

The craftsman through his craft.

Parents serve by caring for their children.

Rulers serve by administering justice.

Ministers serve through the ministry of the Word.

These different callings do not provide different degrees of justification.

The minister is not more justified than the farmer.

Both stand before God upon the same ground:

Christ.

This significantly weakened the medieval distinction between supposedly higher and lower spiritual vocations.

The Priesthood of Believers

Luther's doctrine of Christian liberty was also connected with his understanding of the priesthood of believers.

Peter writes concerning Christians:

> *"But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people."*
>
> — 1 Peter 2:9

Luther did not conclude that churches therefore required no ministers or that every Christian held the same office.

Rather, he rejected the idea that ordained clergy constituted a spiritually superior class of Christian possessing a fundamentally different standing before God.

Every believer has access to God through Christ.

There is:

"one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

— 1 Timothy 2:5

The believer's access to God does not depend upon the superior spiritual status of another human being.

Good Works and the Command of God

If good works do not merit salvation, how do we determine what constitutes a good work?

Luther increasingly insisted that good works are those commanded by God rather than religious inventions devised by men in an attempt to obtain merit.

This principle could be sharply critical of religious practices that appeared impressive but lacked biblical warrant.

A person might undertake elaborate religious exercises while neglecting the ordinary responsibilities God had plainly commanded.

Luther wanted to reverse that tendency.

Serving one's neighbour in obedience to God's command may appear less impressive than undertaking some extraordinary religious exercise.

But the question is not:

Which work appears more religious?

It is:

What has God commanded?

Faith Without Works

Here again we encounter the Epistle of James.

James writes:

"Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone."

— James 2:17

This does not require us to abandon justification by faith.

It requires us to distinguish living faith from empty profession.

A person who claims to possess saving faith while remaining entirely without its fruit gives reason to question the claim.

Works therefore have an evidential role.

They demonstrate the reality of faith.

James writes concerning Abraham:

"Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?"

— James 2:22

The works did not purchase God's favour.

They manifested the faith Abraham possessed.

The Danger of Antinomianism

The rejection of works as the ground of justification can produce another error: antinomianism.

Antinomianism, broadly speaking, treats God's moral Law as though it had no meaningful place in the Christian life.

Luther strongly resisted this conclusion.

The Gospel does not turn evil into good.

Adultery does not cease to be sin because justification is by faith.

Lying does not become righteous because salvation is by grace.

Christian liberty is freedom from the condemnation of the Law and from the attempt to earn salvation through Law-keeping.

It is not freedom to despise God's righteousness.

The Flesh Remains

Luther also possessed a realistic understanding of the continuing struggle with sin.

The justified believer is not immediately transformed into a person incapable of sin.

The flesh remains.

Temptation remains.

The Christian life therefore involves conflict.

Paul writes:

"For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other."

— Galatians 5:17

This prevented Luther's doctrine of Christian liberty from becoming a doctrine of earthly perfection.

The believer remains dependent upon grace.

He does not graduate from the Gospel and return to confidence

in himself.

Simultaneously Righteous and a Sinner

Luther's theology is often summarised by the Latin expression:

simul iustus et peccator—

at the same time righteous and a sinner.

The expression captures an important aspect of his distinction between justification and the believer's present condition.

Considered in relation to Christ, the believer is justified.

Considered in himself, he still experiences sin and requires ongoing sanctification.

This explains why justification cannot rest upon the believer's present moral perfection.

If God accepted Christians only when all remaining sin had disappeared from them, none could possess peace in this life.

Their standing rests upon Christ.

Liberty Produces Love

We can now understand Luther's paradox.

A Christian is a free lord of all, subject to none.

Before God, he does not depend upon human works or human mediators to establish his justification.

But:

A Christian is a servant of all, subject to everyone.

Towards his neighbour, he willingly serves in love.

The first statement prevents works-righteousness.

The second prevents selfishness.

Christian liberty therefore produces not isolation but service.

Christ as the Pattern

This pattern ultimately reflects Christ Himself.

Christ possessed all things, yet humbled Himself and took the form of a servant.

Paul writes:

> *"But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant."*
>
> — Philippians 2:7

The Christian therefore does not ask:

How much must I do before God will save me?

That question has been answered in Christ.

He is now free to ask:

How may I serve others because God has shown mercy to me?

The direction has changed from earning to giving.

Christian Liberty and Conscience

This doctrine also has implications for matters Scripture does not directly command or forbid.

If God has not bound the conscience by His Word, men should be cautious about creating religious laws and then treating those laws as though obedience to them were necessary for justification.

This concern became important in later Reformation disputes concerning ceremonies, food, days and ecclesiastical practices.

Paul writes:

> *"Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday."*
>
> — Colossians 2:16

Christian liberty therefore includes freedom from human regulations when those regulations are imposed upon the conscience as though they possessed divine authority.

This does not mean Christians should exercise liberty selfishly.

Love may voluntarily refrain from something lawful for the sake of another.

But voluntary restraint motivated by love is different from bondage imposed as a condition of righteousness before God.

Good Works in Their Proper Place

We can therefore summarise Luther's position:

Good works are necessary as the fruit and evidence of living faith, but they are not the meritorious ground of justification. The believer serves God and neighbour not in order to purchase salvation, but because salvation has been freely given in Christ.

This preserves both sides of the biblical testimony.

Paul can say:

> *"Not of works, lest any man should boast."*
>
> — Ephesians 2:9

and immediately speak of believers being:

"created in Christ Jesus unto good works."

— Ephesians 2:10

There is no contradiction when the order is maintained.

From Christian Liberty to God's Saving Purpose

We have now considered the principal doctrines necessary for understanding Luther's view of salvation:

the Fall and man's corruption;
the bondage of the human will;
the sovereignty of grace;
justification through faith;
Law and Gospel;
and the place of good works in the Christian life.

But one major question remains before we turn directly to Erasmus and The Bondage of the Will.

If salvation originates in God rather than fallen man's independent will, what does Scripture teach concerning election and predestination?

Does God choose sinners because He foresees that they will choose Him?

Does His election depend upon something found in them?

What did Luther mean by the distinction between God's revealed will and what he called the hidden God?

And how far should we follow Luther when he speaks about matters Scripture has not revealed?

These questions take us to one of the most profound—and potentially difficult—areas of his theology.

CHAPTER 14

Election, Predestination and the Hidden God

The doctrines considered in the preceding chapters lead inevitably to another question.

If fallen man cannot by his own natural power turn himself towards God, and if salvation originates in God's grace rather than in man's independent will, why are some brought to faith while others remain in unbelief?

This brings us to the subjects of election and predestination.

For Luther these were not isolated doctrines added to his theology

at some later stage. They arose naturally from his convictions concerning sin, grace and the sovereignty of God.

Yet this is also an area in which Luther could use very strong language, particularly in The Bondage of the Will. We must therefore proceed carefully.

We need to distinguish between what Scripture clearly reveals concerning God's saving purpose and questions concerning God's secret counsels which Scripture does not fully explain.

Luther himself attempted to make such a distinction when he spoke about God as revealed and God hidden in His majesty.

Understanding that distinction is essential before we turn to his controversy with Erasmus.

What Is Election?

In its simplest biblical sense, election refers to God's choosing.

Paul writes concerning believers:

> *"According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world."*
>
> — Ephesians 1:4

The initiative in this verse belongs to God.

He:

"hath chosen us."

And the choice is said to have taken place:

"before the foundation of the world."

Election therefore cannot be explained as God's response to works already performed in time.

Paul continues:

> *"Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will."*
>
> — Ephesians 1:5

Again the emphasis falls upon God's will and purpose.

For Luther, such passages confirmed that salvation has its ultimate source in God.

Election in Christ

An important expression in Ephesians must not be overlooked.

Paul says:

"he hath chosen us in him."

Election cannot properly be separated from Christ.

The biblical doctrine is not intended merely to encourage abstract speculation concerning decrees hidden in eternity.

God's saving purpose is centred upon His Son.

The same chapter speaks repeatedly of blessings being found:

"in Christ,"

"in whom,"

and:

"in the beloved."

This Christ-centred character of election is important because speculation about predestination can easily direct attention away from the very Person in whom salvation is revealed.

Luther's pastoral emphasis, at his best, directed troubled consciences towards Christ rather than towards attempts to discover God's secret counsel.

Before Good or Evil

Romans 9 became especially important in Luther's controversy with Erasmus.

Paul speaks of Jacob and Esau:

> *"For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth."*
>
> — Romans 9:11

Paul deliberately places God's purpose before the children's works.

The conclusion follows:

"not of works, but of him that calleth."

For Luther, this was powerful evidence against any doctrine which made God's election ultimately dependent upon some meritorious act originating in man.

The purpose according to election stands in God who calls.

Paul continues:

"As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated."

— Romans 9:13

These words immediately raise difficult questions.

What exactly is the nature of the election being discussed?

How does Paul's argument concerning Israel relate to individual salvation?

What does the language of love and hatred mean in its Old Testament context?

Those questions deserve careful exegesis and should not be settled merely by quoting the verse in isolation.

Nevertheless, Luther saw in Romans 9 a direct challenge to the claim that fallen man's independent free will ultimately determines God's saving action.

Paul's argument repeatedly directs attention towards God's purpose.

"I Will Have Mercy"

Paul then quotes God's words to Moses:

"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."

— Romans 9:15

He draws the conclusion:

"So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy."

— Romans 9:16

Few passages could be more directly relevant to Luther's controversy with Erasmus.

The text explicitly mentions willing:

"not of him that willeth."

For Luther, this did not mean that believers never will, believe or run.

It concerned the ultimate cause of saving mercy.

The source is not man's willing.

It is:

"God that sheweth mercy."

Grace therefore remains grace.

Election and Foreknowledge

A common explanation of election argues that God chooses people because He foresees that they will believe.

Scripture certainly speaks of God's foreknowledge.

Peter addresses believers as:

"Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father."

— 1 Peter 1:2

The question is what foreknowledge means and what relationship it bears to election.

If it simply means that God looks forward and discovers which spiritually neutral individuals will independently choose Christ, then the decisive cause of salvation remains in man's choice.

Luther's understanding of man's bondage made such an explanation inadequate.

If fallen man cannot come to Christ unless the Father draws him, then God's foreknowledge cannot simply be foreknowledge of an unaided act that fallen man possesses the natural spiritual ability to produce.

God's saving purpose must itself account for the believer's coming to Christ.

Grace and Election

Paul brings grace and election together in Romans 11:

"Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace."

— Romans 11:5

He immediately adds:

"And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace."

— Romans 11:6

This connection is fundamental.

Election is described as:

"the election of grace."

For Luther, election therefore protected the gratuity of salvation.

The believer cannot look at the unbeliever and say:

God supplied us both with exactly the same spiritual ability, but I made the better independent choice.

The biblical question remains:

"Who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?"

— 1 Corinthians 4:7

Election directs the final answer towards God's grace.

Predestination

The word predestination refers to God's determining beforehand.

Paul uses the language in Romans 8:

"For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son."

— Romans 8:29

Then:

"Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified."

— Romans 8:30

The sequence is striking:

foreknown;

predestinated;

called;

justified;

glorified.

God's saving purpose therefore reaches from eternity to final glory.

The believer's salvation does not appear as an uncertain project whose final outcome depends upon whether God can persuade an autonomous human will to cooperate.

It rests upon God's purpose.

Predestinated to What?

We should also notice the goal:

"to be conformed to the image of his Son."

Predestination is not presented merely as a theological mechanism explaining who goes to heaven.

Its purpose is conformity to Christ.

God's saving purpose produces a people who bear the likeness of His Son.

This guards against a merely speculative interest in election.

Biblical election is connected with holiness.

Paul similarly says that believers were chosen:

"that we should be holy and without blame before him in love."

— Ephesians 1:4

Election is therefore no excuse for careless living.

It is directed towards holiness.

Does Election Destroy Evangelism?

Another objection naturally follows.

If God has elected His people, why preach the Gospel?

The New Testament never draws that conclusion.

Paul believed strongly in election and preached tirelessly.

Indeed, at Corinth the Lord told him:

"Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace:

For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city."

— Acts 18:9–10

God's possession of a people in Corinth did not make preaching unnecessary.

It encouraged Paul to continue preaching.

The sovereign purpose of God includes the means by which His people are called.

As we saw earlier:

"faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

— Romans 10:17

Election and evangelism therefore need not be opponents.

God ordains both the end and the means.

The Gospel Is to Be Preached

The Christian is not commissioned to discover the secret identity

of the elect before preaching.

Christ's command is public:

"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."

— Mark 16:15

The Gospel is therefore to be proclaimed without requiring the preacher to know God's secret counsel.

The minister's responsibility is to preach Christ.

The hearer's responsibility is to repent and believe.

God's sovereign work in salvation does not alter the Gospel command.

This distinction becomes important when considering Luther's teaching concerning the hidden God.

The Difficult Question

Election inevitably raises a difficult question.

If God graciously brings some sinners to faith, why does He not bring all?

At this point theological systems can move beyond what Scripture has plainly revealed.

Luther recognised the difficulty and sometimes addressed it by distinguishing between God as He has revealed Himself in His Word and God considered in His hidden majesty.

This is one of the most difficult aspects of The Bondage of the Will.

God Revealed

God has made Himself known.

Most importantly, He has revealed Himself in Christ.

Christ says:

"He that hath seen me hath seen the Father."

— John 14:9

The Gospel reveals God's command and promise.

It tells sinners to repent.

It proclaims Christ.

It promises salvation to those who believe.

This revealed Word is where faith must rest.

The Christian is not called to penetrate beyond revelation and

discover what God has not chosen to make known.

The Hidden God

Luther nevertheless spoke of God hidden in His majesty—sometimes expressed through the Latin idea of Deus absconditus, the hidden God.

By this he sought to acknowledge that God's eternal government and secret counsel extend beyond what He has revealed for us to know.

There are questions Scripture does not fully answer.

Why does God permit particular evils?

Why is one person born in one circumstance and another elsewhere?

Why does one hear the Gospel repeatedly while another scarcely hears it?

Why does one believe while another remains hardened?

Luther's answer was not that human reason can penetrate every secret purpose of God.

There is a boundary.

The Secret Things Belong to God

The principle is plainly expressed in Deuteronomy:

> *"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever."*

— Deuteronomy 29:29

This verse provides an important safeguard.

There are:

secret things

and:

things which are revealed.

The Christian is responsible for receiving what God has revealed.

He is not authorised to construct confident doctrines concerning matters God has kept secret.

This principle is especially important when dealing with predestination.

Where Luther Becomes Difficult

In The Bondage of the Will, Luther sometimes speaks about God's hidden will in language that can sound severe.

He distinguishes between God as preached and God in His hidden majesty, and he refuses to subject God's secret purposes to human judgment.

There is an important truth here.

God is God.

Man is not entitled to place his Creator in the dock and demand that the Almighty justify Himself according to human standards.

Paul himself asks:

"Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?"

— Romans 9:20

Nevertheless, caution is required.

A legitimate confession that God's purposes exceed our understanding must not become permission to assert as revealed truth things which Scripture has not revealed.

The doctrine of the hidden God should produce humility, not speculation.

God's Revealed Character Must Be Maintained

Whatever mysteries surround predestination, Scripture plainly reveals God's character.

God is holy.

God is righteous.

God does not sin.

God does not lie.

Abraham asks:

"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

— Genesis 18:25

The expected answer is yes.

Therefore we must not explain divine sovereignty in a way that attributes moral evil to God.

When Scripture leaves the precise relationship between divine determination and human sin mysterious, it is safer to preserve both truths than to solve the mystery by denying either one.

God is sovereign.

Man is responsible.
God is righteous.
Man willingly sins.
Scripture teaches all four.

Pharaoh

Pharaoh becomes particularly important in The Bondage of the Will because Scripture says both that Pharaoh hardened his heart and that God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

God declares:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart."

— Exodus 7:3

Yet elsewhere:

"Pharaoh hardened his heart."

— Exodus 8:32

Paul returns to the example:

"Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth."

— Romans 9:18

Luther would use Pharaoh as a major argument against Erasmus.

But the biblical data must be handled in full.

Divine hardening does not transform an innocent, God-loving Pharaoh into an unwilling sinner.

Pharaoh is already a proud and oppressive ruler.

Nevertheless, Scripture genuinely attributes hardening to God.

How those truths relate is one of the questions we shall examine when we study Luther's argument directly.

Election and Assurance

Election was not intended merely to provoke fear.

Properly understood, it can provide assurance.

If salvation ultimately rested upon the believer's ability to maintain himself by his own independent will, his security would finally rest upon something changeable.

But if salvation originates in God's gracious purpose, confidence is directed towards God's faithfulness.

Christ says concerning His sheep:

"And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand."

— John 10:28

The emphasis is not upon the strength of the sheep.

It is upon the security provided by the Shepherd.

Do Not Search for Election Within Yourself

A troubled Christian may ask:

How can I discover whether I am elect?

The wrong response is to turn inward and attempt to inspect God's secret decree.

The Gospel directs the sinner towards Christ.

The question Scripture places before him is not:

Can you discover your name written in God's secret counsel before you come to Christ?

It is:

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

— Acts 16:31

Christ is the proper object of faith.

We should not allow speculation concerning election to direct sinners away from the very Saviour whom the Gospel openly presents.

A Boundary We Should Respect

There is therefore wisdom in maintaining the boundary between revelation and speculation.

We may affirm what Scripture says:

God chooses.

God predestinates.

God calls.

God shows mercy.

Salvation is of grace.

Man cannot boast.

But when we ask questions that Scripture does not answer, we should be willing to say:

God has not revealed this to us.

That is not theological weakness.

It is submission to the authority of Scripture.

If sola Scriptura means anything, it must also mean refusing to speak dogmatically where Scripture itself has not spoken.

Luther Must Also Remain Under Scripture

This becomes particularly important in the next part of our study.

Luther's defence of divine sovereignty against Erasmus contains powerful biblical arguments.

But Luther was not an apostle.

The Bondage of the Will is not Scripture.

Therefore, even when we sympathise strongly with Luther's doctrine of grace, we must continue to distinguish between:

the biblical text;

Luther's interpretation of that text;

and:

the conclusions Luther draws from it.

The principle Luther asserted at Worms applies equally to his own writings.

His conscience was bound by Scripture.

So must ours be.

The Foundation Is Now Laid

We have now reached an important point in Understanding Luther.

Part One followed Luther historically from his birth to the Diet of Worms.

Part Two has examined the principal theological convictions necessary for understanding his later controversy:

Scripture as the final authority;

the Fall and man's spiritual condition;

the bondage of the human will;

grace and divine sovereignty;

justification by faith;

Law and Gospel;

Christian liberty and good works;

and now:

election and predestination.

We are therefore ready to approach the work for which this companion volume has particularly been prepared.

In 1524, Desiderius Erasmus published a work defending a place for human free choice in salvation.

Luther regarded the issue as fundamental.

He believed Erasmus had finally addressed the question lying beneath many of the controversies of the Reformation.

In 1525 Luther replied with one of his most important and uncompromising works:

De Servo Arbitrio — *The Bondage of the Will.*

Before examining Luther's reply, however, we need to meet his opponent.

Erasmus was no ignorant defender of corruption.

He was one of the greatest scholars in Europe, an advocate of reform, a critic of ecclesiastical abuses and the editor of the Greek New Testament.

Why, then, did he oppose Luther?

That begins the next part of our study.

PART THREE

LUTHER AND ERASMUS

The theological foundations have now been laid.

We have considered Luther's understanding of Scripture, the Fall, the human will, divine grace, justification, Law and Gospel, Christian liberty, and election. We are therefore in a position to approach the controversy that produced The Bondage of the Will.

This controversy was not between Luther and an ignorant opponent.

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam was one of the most distinguished scholars in Europe. He was an accomplished humanist, an editor of the Greek New Testament, a critic of ecclesiastical abuses and an advocate of reform.

In several respects, Erasmus and Luther might initially have appeared to be natural allies.

Both criticised corruption within the Church.

Both recognised the importance of biblical study.

Both challenged aspects of contemporary religious practice.

Both benefited from the new world of printing and scholarship.

Yet beneath these similarities lay a profound theological

disagreement.

The issue that finally exposed it was the freedom of the human will.

CHAPTER 15

Erasmus and the Question of Free Will

To understand The Bondage of the Will, we must first understand the man to whom it was addressed.

Luther's opponent was not simply defending every feature of the medieval Church. Erasmus had himself spent years criticising superstition, clerical ignorance, moral corruption and empty religious ceremony.

Indeed, some of Luther's opponents suspected Erasmus of helping to create the intellectual conditions in which the Reformation had become possible.

Yet Erasmus refused to follow Luther into open separation from Rome.

Their eventual disagreement reveals that two men may agree that reform is necessary while disagreeing profoundly about what the Gospel itself teaches concerning man and grace.

Desiderius Erasmus

Erasmus was born in Rotterdam, probably in 1466, though the precise year of his birth has been debated.

He became the outstanding representative of what is commonly called Christian humanism.

As we noted earlier, the word humanism in this historical setting should not be confused with modern secular humanism.

Renaissance humanists emphasised education, language, ancient literature and a return to original sources.

Their characteristic expression was:

ad fontes — to the sources.

For Christian scholarship, this meant renewed attention to the biblical texts in their original languages.

Erasmus became one of the most important figures in this movement.

Erasmus and the Greek New Testament

In 1516 Erasmus published an edition of the Greek New

Testament accompanied by a revised Latin text and annotations.

The work was enormously influential.

Its first edition was produced quickly and contained textual and editorial imperfections, and Erasmus subsequently revised it through several editions. Nevertheless, its historical importance was considerable.

Western European scholars now possessed printed access to the Greek New Testament in a form that could be studied and compared with the traditional Latin Vulgate.

Luther himself benefited from this revival of Greek New Testament scholarship.

When he translated the New Testament into German, the textual work associated with Erasmus formed part of the scholarly world upon which he could draw.

There is therefore an important irony in their later controversy.

The scholar who helped place the Greek New Testament before Europe would become the man against whom Luther wrote his most famous defence of the bondage of the human will.

Erasmus the Reformer

Erasmus was deeply critical of many abuses within contemporary Christianity.

He mocked ignorant clergy.

He criticised superstition.

He attacked empty ceremonial religion.

He wanted better education and a more serious knowledge of Scripture.

His famous Praise of Folly satirised numerous features of European religious and intellectual life.

Erasmus therefore cannot accurately be portrayed simply as an unquestioning defender of everything Rome taught or practised.

He wanted reform.

But his conception of reform differed substantially from Luther's.

Erasmus generally preferred education, moral improvement, moderation and gradual correction.

Luther increasingly believed the problem was more radical.

The issue was not merely that Christians needed better education or that corrupt practices required reform.

Fallen man was spiritually dead.

His will was bound.

He required not merely improvement but divine regeneration.

Here the difference between the two men begins to emerge.

Erasmus and Luther

When Luther first became controversial, Erasmus did not immediately attack him.

Indeed, Erasmus could sympathise with some of Luther's criticisms.

He too recognised genuine abuses within the Church.

But Erasmus became increasingly uncomfortable with both the direction and the manner of Luther's Reformation.

Luther's language could be extraordinarily severe.

His attacks upon ecclesiastical authorities became increasingly uncompromising.

And the movement surrounding him threatened the unity and stability Erasmus valued.

Erasmus therefore attempted for a considerable time to avoid becoming directly involved in the dispute.

This became increasingly difficult.

Both Luther's supporters and his opponents wanted to know where Europe's most famous scholar stood.

Two Different Temperaments

The contrast between the two men was striking.

Erasmus valued moderation.

Luther valued certainty.

Erasmus was cautious about making dogmatic assertions concerning difficult theological questions.

Luther believed that where Scripture had spoken, the Christian must confess what it teaches.

Erasmus feared destructive controversy.

Luther believed truth could require controversy.

These differences in temperament should not be mistaken for the theological disagreement itself, but they affected the manner in which the controversy developed.

Erasmus preferred careful qualification.

Luther frequently responded with a hammer.

Was Certainty Possible?

One of their deepest differences concerned theological certainty.

Erasmus expressed reluctance concerning confident assertions in difficult doctrinal matters. He emphasised the obscurity of certain questions and the importance of humility.

There is something commendable in such caution.

Christians should not pretend to know what God has not revealed.

We have already considered the importance of Deuteronomy 29:29:

> **"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us."**

But Luther believed Erasmus carried caution too far.

If Scripture clearly reveals something, refusing to affirm it is not humility.

It is unbelief.

Christian faith necessarily makes assertions.

Christ is the Son of God.

Christ died.

Christ rose from the dead.

The sinner is justified through faith.

These are not tentative possibilities about which Christianity may remain permanently undecided.

For Luther, certainty grounded in God's Word was essential to faith.

Why Free Will?

Erasmus eventually chose the question of free will as the subject upon which he would engage Luther directly.

This was a shrewd choice.

The subject was already controversial, and Erasmus could present himself as occupying a moderate position between extremes.

In 1524 he published:

De Libero Arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio,

commonly translated as:

On Free Will or The Diatribe on Free Will.

The work was deliberately restrained in tone compared with

Luther's more aggressive controversial writings.

Erasmus did not claim that fallen man could save himself independently of grace.

That point must be made clear.

The dispute was subtler.

Erasmus Did Not Deny Grace

It would be inaccurate to say:

Luther believed in grace, whereas Erasmus believed man saved himself.

Erasmus affirmed the necessity of divine grace.

The question concerned what role remained for the human will under grace.

Could fallen man's will cooperate with God's gracious action?

Did some capacity remain by which man could turn towards the things that lead to salvation?

Erasmus wanted to preserve a genuine role for human choice without denying the necessity of grace.

Luther believed that this apparently modest concession fundamentally compromised the biblical doctrine of grace.

This is why their disagreement became so sharp.

Erasmus's Definition of Free Choice

Erasmus described free choice in terms of a power of the human will by which man can apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation or turn away from them.

The definition attempted to preserve meaningful human participation while leaving room for divine grace.

To many readers this may appear reasonable.

Surely Scripture commands men to repent.

Surely it commands them to believe.

Surely men are held responsible for refusing.

Does this not imply that the human will possesses some ability to respond?

This was precisely the kind of reasoning Luther opposed.

Command Does Not Prove Ability

One of Luther's central responses was that a command does not necessarily prove ability.

If God commands:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart"

it does not follow that fallen man naturally possesses the ability to fulfil that command perfectly.

The command reveals what man ought to do.

It does not necessarily reveal what fallen man can do.

This distinction became fundamental to Luther's reply.

The Law exposes inability.

If every divine command proved man's natural ability to fulfil it, the Law could no longer perform the function Paul attributes to it:

"For by the law is the knowledge of sin."

— Romans 3:20

For Luther, Erasmus repeatedly confused human responsibility with human spiritual ability.

"Turn Ye"

Erasmus could appeal to biblical commands calling men to turn to God.

If Scripture says:

Turn, surely man must possess some capacity to turn.

Luther rejected the inference.

A command tells the sinner his duty.

It may also expose his inability.

The fact that a debtor is commanded to pay does not prove that he possesses the money.

The obligation remains even when the ability has been lost.

Likewise, Luther argued, mankind's fall into sin does not cancel God's righteous claim upon His creatures.

God's command remains righteous.

Man's inability reveals the depth of his fallen condition.

"Choose You This Day"

Passages involving choice could similarly be used in defence of free will.

Joshua tells Israel:

"Choose you this day whom ye will serve."

— Joshua 24:15

At first sight this appears decisive.

Surely Scripture itself commands men to choose.

But Luther would ask what kind of choice is under discussion and whether the passage establishes the natural spiritual ability of fallen man to regenerate himself or produce saving faith.

This distinction is essential.

A biblical use of the word choose does not by itself settle the theological doctrine of free will.

The context must determine what is being chosen, by whom, and under what circumstances.

"If Thou Wilt"

The same principle applies to conditional language.

Scripture may say:

If thou wilt...

or:

If ye be willing...

Erasmus could treat such expressions as evidence of human ability.

Luther replied that conditional statements describe what follows if something occurs; they do not necessarily establish that fallen man possesses within himself the spiritual power to produce the required condition.

Again, the dispute concerned interpretation.

Both men used Scripture.

The question was what the texts actually proved.

Why Luther Welcomed the Subject

Luther's response to Erasmus is particularly interesting because, despite his fierce disagreement, he credited Erasmus with identifying the real issue.

Other opponents, Luther complained, had argued about matters he regarded as secondary:

the papacy,
indulgences,
purgatory,
and similar controversies.

Erasmus, by contrast, had taken hold of the central question.

Luther famously praised him, in effect, for having attacked the throat rather than the limbs.

Why?

Because the doctrine of the human will determines how salvation itself is understood.

If fallen man's will contributes the decisive independent movement towards salvation, Luther believed grace has been compromised at its foundation.

The Heart of the Reformation?

This observation helps us understand why The Bondage of the Will occupies such an important place among Luther's writings.

Modern summaries of the Reformation often concentrate upon:

justification by faith

and:

the authority of Scripture.

Both are certainly fundamental.

But Luther himself regarded the controversy over the will as reaching beneath them.

Why does one believe?

Why does one receive the righteousness of Christ?

What accounts for the sinner's movement from unbelief to faith?

If the final answer is man's autonomous free will, Luther believed salvation ultimately rests upon man.

If the answer is the sovereign grace of God, salvation rests upon God.

The dispute therefore concerned the deepest foundation of the Reformation doctrine of grace.

Erasmus's Concern for Responsibility

We should nevertheless understand Erasmus fairly.

His defence of free choice was not motivated merely by a desire to exalt human pride.

He was concerned about the moral consequences of denying human freedom.

If everything occurs necessarily under divine sovereignty, what happens to responsibility?

Why command?

Why warn?
Why punish?
Why reward?
Could sinners simply say:
I could do nothing else; therefore I am not responsible?
Could the doctrine encourage moral carelessness?
These are serious questions.
They cannot simply be dismissed.

Indeed, they remain among the most difficult questions raised by Luther's position.

Luther's Concern for Grace

Luther, however, saw an equal and opposite danger.

If concern for responsibility leads us to give fallen man a spiritual power Scripture denies him, we have solved one difficulty by creating another.

The Bible describes man as:
dead in sins;
a servant of sin;
unable to come to Christ unless drawn by the Father;
and:
not seeking after God.

If free will is defined in a way inconsistent with those descriptions, Luther argued that the doctrine must be rejected regardless of how reasonable it appears to human judgment.

For Luther, Scripture must determine anthropology.
Human philosophy must not correct Scripture.

Two Concerns That Must Be Preserved

This gives us a useful framework for reading the controversy.
Erasmus was concerned to preserve:
human responsibility.
Luther was concerned to preserve:
divine grace and sovereignty.
But we should not assume that these truths are mutually exclusive.
Scripture affirms both.
Man is responsible.
God is sovereign.

Therefore our task is not to choose whichever truth appears

easier to explain.

It is to ask whether Scripture itself provides warrant for the way either theologian relates them.

This is particularly important because Luther's rhetoric can sometimes make his conclusions appear stronger than the biblical argument supporting them.

The Difference Was Now Public

Erasmus's Diatribe appeared in 1524.

Luther did not answer immediately.

He had many other pressures upon him, and the Reformation itself was entering a turbulent period.

But when he did respond, he responded at great length.

His answer appeared in December 1525 under the title:

De Servo Arbitrio—

On the Bondage of the Will.

It was not a conciliatory book.

Luther believed the Gospel itself was at stake.

And he began by challenging something even more fundamental than Erasmus's particular interpretation of free will.

Before asking whether man's will is free, Luther asked whether Christians can possess certainty about what God has revealed at all.

Can Scripture speak clearly?

Must theology make assertions?

Or should Christians remain deliberately undecided concerning difficult doctrines?

That is where Luther begins his attack.

CHAPTER 16

Luther Answers Erasmus

When Erasmus published On Free Will in 1524, Luther did not answer immediately.

By this time Luther was occupied with many controversies, and events surrounding the Reformation were moving rapidly. Nevertheless, Erasmus had raised a question Luther could not leave unanswered.

The issue was not merely whether one particular definition of free will was correct.

For Luther, the controversy reached much deeper.

It concerned the authority and clarity of Scripture, the condition of fallen man, the nature of grace, the sovereignty of God and ultimately the question:

> **Who saves—the sinner cooperating with grace through a remaining power of free will, or God acting graciously upon a sinner who cannot save himself?**

Luther's answer appeared in December 1525.

Its Latin title was:

De Servo Arbitrio

usually translated:

The Bondage of the Will.

Luther's response was forceful, sometimes severe, and deliberately uncompromising.

Yet before dealing with individual passages concerning the human will, Luther addressed something more fundamental.

Can Christians know with certainty what God has revealed?

Luther's Respect for Erasmus

Although Luther strongly opposed Erasmus's theology, he recognised the importance of his opponent.

Erasmus was no insignificant controversialist.

He was one of Europe's foremost scholars.

More importantly, Luther believed Erasmus had identified the real theological issue.

Towards the end of The Bondage of the Will, Luther effectively congratulates Erasmus for having dealt with the central matter rather than peripheral controversies.

Others had attacked him concerning such subjects as the papacy, indulgences and purgatory.

Erasmus had addressed the human will.

For Luther, he had reached the heart of the dispute.

This is important for understanding the book.

The Bondage of the Will was not simply another piece of Reformation polemic.

Luther regarded the subject as fundamental to the doctrine of salvation.

Erasmus and Theological Caution

Erasmus approached the controversy cautiously.

He was reluctant to make dogmatic assertions concerning matters he regarded as difficult or obscure. He preferred moderation and was suspicious of theological certainty where Scripture appeared capable of different interpretations.

There is an understandable attraction in this approach.

Christian theologians can easily become dogmatic concerning matters God has not clearly revealed.

Humility is necessary.

Luther himself had no right to claim knowledge of God's secret purposes beyond Scripture.

But Luther believed Erasmus had confused two very different things:

humility concerning what God has not revealed

and:

uncertainty concerning what God has revealed.

The first is proper humility.

The second, Luther believed, undermines faith.

Christianity Makes Assertions

One of Luther's most famous statements in the opening part of ***The Bondage of the Will*** concerns what he calls assertions.

By an assertion Luther means a definite confession that something is true.

Christianity necessarily contains such assertions.

For example:

God exists.

Christ is the Son of God.

Christ died for sinners.

Christ rose from the dead.

Salvation is found in Him.

These are not matters upon which Christian faith can remain permanently undecided.

The apostles did not preach:

Perhaps Christ has risen.

They proclaimed:

"This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses."

— Acts 2:32

Christian faith therefore depends upon revealed truth.

For Luther, a Christianity unwilling to make assertions would cease to confess anything definite at all.

Certainty and Pride Are Not the Same

Luther's argument must not be misunderstood.

Certainty is not automatically arrogance.

A man may be extremely confident and completely wrong.

Likewise, a person may speak cautiously and still be mistaken.

The question is not the psychological strength of the person's conviction.

The question is:

What has God revealed?

If certainty rests merely upon human opinion, it deserves no special authority.

But if God has spoken clearly, believing Him is not pride.

The Christian's certainty rests upon the truthfulness of God rather than upon the infallibility of his own reasoning.

This distinction is essential.

The Limits of Certainty

At the same time, Luther's emphasis requires an important qualification.

Christians must not claim biblical certainty for conclusions Scripture does not establish.

We have already considered the principle:

"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us."

— Deuteronomy 29:29

The distinction is therefore not between:

certainty and humility.

It is between:

what God has revealed

and:

what God has kept secret.

We should be certain concerning the first and humble concerning the second.

Is Scripture Obscure?

Erasmus had appealed to the difficulty and obscurity of Scripture.

Luther responded by making an important distinction.

There are certainly passages of Scripture that are difficult.

Some contain unfamiliar words.

Others require historical knowledge.

Some prophetic passages are difficult to interpret.

Peter himself acknowledges that Paul's epistles contain:

"some things hard to be understood."

— 2 Peter 3:16

Luther therefore did not need to claim that every biblical verse is equally easy to understand.

His argument was more precise.

The central truths necessary for Christian faith are not hidden in hopeless obscurity.

Scripture clearly proclaims Christ and the way of salvation.

Two Kinds of Obscurity

Luther distinguished, in effect, between obscurity arising from Scripture and obscurity arising from us.

A biblical text may be clear while the reader fails to understand it because of ignorance, prejudice or spiritual blindness.

The fault does not necessarily lie in the Word.

This distinction resembles the difference between a bright light and defective eyesight.

The fact that a blind man cannot see the sun does not prove that the sun is dark.

Likewise, human failure to understand Scripture does not establish that Scripture itself is fundamentally obscure.

The External Clarity of Scripture

This leads to what later theology has often called the external clarity of Scripture.

The words of Scripture possess objective meaning.

They can be read, studied, translated, compared and expounded.

God has communicated through language.

Therefore theology is not an attempt to discover hidden meanings accessible only through some secret spiritual elite.

This conviction was essential to the Reformation.

If Scripture were inherently incapable of communicating definite doctrine, appealing to Scripture against ecclesiastical authority would accomplish very little.

Luther's stand at Worms depended upon the conviction that Scripture could actually establish truth.

The Internal Problem

Yet Luther also recognised another difficulty.

A person may understand the grammatical meaning of biblical words without spiritually receiving what they teach.

Paul writes:

> *"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him."*
>
> — 1 Corinthians 2:14

This does not mean the words possess no intelligible meaning.

It concerns man's spiritual reception of divine truth.

Here again Luther's doctrine of Scripture connects with his doctrine of fallen man.

The problem is not solved merely by providing clearer information.

The sinner requires the work of God.

Scripture Must Interpret Scripture

Luther's confidence in biblical clarity did not mean that isolated verses should be interpreted carelessly.

Difficult passages must be considered in relation to clearer passages.

Context matters.

Words must be understood according to their use.

The argument of a biblical writer must be followed.

This becomes particularly important in the controversy with Erasmus because both men could quote Scripture.

The question was not:

Who can produce a verse containing the word "will" or "choose"?

The question was:

What does that verse actually establish concerning fallen man's spiritual ability?

Erasmus's Biblical Arguments

Erasmus appealed to passages in which God commands men to act.

Scripture says:

Turn.

Repent.

Choose.

Keep my commandments.

For Erasmus, such language appeared to imply genuine human ability.

Why would God command man to do something if man possessed no ability to do it?

This argument has considerable intuitive force.

It remains one of the principal objections to Luther's doctrine.

But Luther believed it rested upon a false assumption.

Command and Ability

Luther's reply was that a command tells us what we ought to do.

It does not necessarily tell us what fallen man can do.

The Law says:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart."

— Matthew 22:37

Does the existence of that command prove that every fallen person naturally possesses the spiritual ability to love God perfectly?

Clearly not.

The command reveals God's righteous requirement.

Our inability does not lower the requirement.

Instead, the Law exposes our sin.

Paul writes:

"For by the law is the knowledge of sin."

— Romans 3:20

This became one of Luther's central interpretative principles against Erasmus.

The Debt Illustration

The point can be illustrated with a debtor.

Suppose a man owes a lawful debt but has squandered everything

he possesses.

The creditor's command:

Pay what you owe

does not prove that the debtor currently possesses the money.

The obligation remains even though the debtor has rendered himself unable to fulfil it.

Likewise, Luther argued, man's fall into sin does not remove God's righteous claim upon him.

God does not become obligated to reduce His standard because man has corrupted himself.

The command therefore reveals both duty and failure.

Why, Then, Does God Command?

Erasmus's objection remains powerful.

Why command what fallen man cannot spiritually accomplish?

Luther's answer is closely connected with his understanding of the Law.

God's commands expose man's condition.

They destroy false confidence.

They show him what righteousness requires and thereby reveal his need for grace.

Paul writes:

"I had not known sin, but by the law."

— Romans 7:7

The command therefore has a purpose even when fallen man cannot fulfil it perfectly.

It teaches him what he ought to be and reveals what he actually is.

"If Thou Wilt"

Erasmus also appealed to conditional passages.

Scripture may speak in terms such as:

If thou wilt...

Surely, Erasmus reasoned, such language presupposes ability.

Luther again rejected the inference.

A conditional statement establishes the relationship between a condition and its consequence.

It does not necessarily establish the sinner's natural ability to produce the condition.

The question of ability must be established from Scripture directly rather than assumed from the grammatical form of a command or condition.

"Choose"

The same applies to biblical commands to choose.

Joshua famously declares:

"Choose you this day whom ye will serve."

— Joshua 24:15

The word choose is clearly present.

But the existence of a choice does not automatically establish the theological doctrine Erasmus wished to defend.

We must ask:

Who is being addressed?

What choice is being presented?

Does the passage concern regeneration?

Does it state that fallen man can produce saving faith independently of prior divine grace?

Luther believed his opponents frequently extracted a doctrine of free will from texts that did not actually address the question.

The Indicative and the Imperative

A useful distinction emerges here between statements of what is and commands concerning what ought to be.

Theologians often describe these as the indicative and the imperative.

For example:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

— John 6:44

This is an assertion concerning ability.

By contrast:

"Repent ye, and believe the gospel."

— Mark 1:15

is a command.

Both are true.

The command establishes man's duty.

The statement in John addresses man's ability.

Luther believed Erasmus's argument effectively used the

command to overturn the statement concerning inability.

Luther wanted both passages retained.

The Power of Reason

Behind the exegetical disagreement lay another question:

What role should human reason play in theology?

Luther did not reject reason altogether.

He reasoned constantly.

The Bondage of the Will is itself an extended argument.

But reason must remain subordinate to revelation.

If Scripture teaches something that human reason finds difficult, Luther believed the Christian must not alter Scripture simply to make the doctrine appear more reasonable.

This becomes especially important when considering divine sovereignty.

The God We Can Understand

Human beings naturally want a God whose actions can be fully explained according to human standards.

But Luther repeatedly emphasised the difference between Creator and creature.

Paul asks:

"For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?"

— Romans 11:34

The Christian does not possess a position above God from which he can judge whether God's purposes meet an independently established standard.

Yet, as we noted in the previous chapter, this principle must be handled carefully.

Submission to mystery does not give theologians permission to attribute to God whatever they wish.

We remain bound by what Scripture actually reveals.

God's Foreknowledge

Luther now moves towards one of the strongest parts of his argument.

If God infallibly foreknows all things, can future events ultimately remain uncertain?

Suppose God knows infallibly that an event will occur tomorrow.

Can that event fail to occur?

If it could fail, God's knowledge would have been mistaken.

But God cannot be mistaken.

Therefore what God infallibly foreknows will certainly occur.

Luther believed this created a serious difficulty for Erasmus's conception of free will.

Foreknowledge and Necessity

Here we must understand Luther's use of the word necessity.

He does not necessarily mean compulsion.

As we saw earlier, a person may act necessarily according to his character while acting willingly.

The important point is certainty.

What God foreknows cannot ultimately fail to happen.

This raises profound questions.

Does God's foreknowledge cause the event?

Is certainty the same as causal necessity?

How does foreknowledge relate to human responsibility?

These questions require careful distinction, and Luther's treatment of them will need to be examined rather than merely repeated.

But his central challenge to Erasmus is clear.

A doctrine of free will cannot be developed as though God's perfect foreknowledge did not exist.

God's Foreknowledge Is Not Guesswork

Human foreknowledge is uncertain.

We may say:

I know what he will probably do.

But we may be wrong.

God's knowledge is fundamentally different.

Isaiah declares:

"Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done."

— Isaiah 46:10

God does not predict the future by examining probabilities.

He knows.

Therefore Luther asks Erasmus to consider whether a supposedly independent human will can make the future genuinely uncertain

while God simultaneously knows that future infallibly.

This moves the controversy beyond individual proof texts.

The question now concerns the very nature of God.

Luther's Stronger Claim

Luther goes further than simply asserting divine foreknowledge.

He connects God's knowledge with God's will and providence.

Nothing takes God by surprise.

History is not ultimately governed by independent powers whose actions God merely observes in advance.

God:

"worketh all things after the counsel of his own will."

— Ephesians 1:11

For Luther, divine sovereignty therefore reaches beyond mere observation.

God governs.

This is where ***The Bondage of the Will*** becomes both powerful and difficult.

How do we confess God's government of all things without making Him morally responsible for sin?

Luther's answer involves the distinction between necessity and compulsion, which will require closer examination.

Erasmus's Moderate Position Under Pressure

Erasmus had deliberately attempted to occupy a moderate position.

He did not claim that man could save himself without grace.

He merely wished to preserve some role for free choice.

But Luther's method was to press the question to its foundation.

What exactly is this remaining power?

Where does Scripture teach it?

Can spiritually dead man exercise it?

If it is spiritually good, did man receive it from God?

If God must first enable the sinner to use it, where does the decisive movement actually originate?

If one sinner uses it and another does not, what ultimately makes them differ?

Luther would not allow the phrase free will to remain undefined.

The Question Erasmus Could Not Avoid

The controversy therefore increasingly centres upon one question:

What can fallen man's will actually do towards his own salvation before God's grace renews him?

If the answer is:

something,

Luther asks what that something is and where Scripture teaches it.

If the answer is:

nothing,

then the term free will, at least in spiritual matters, has lost the meaning Erasmus wished to preserve.

This is why Luther regarded the dispute as so fundamental.

The Argument Is Now Ready

The opening sections of ***The Bondage of the Will*** therefore establish the ground upon which Luther intends to fight.

Christian theology can make definite assertions because God has spoken.

Scripture is sufficiently clear to establish the essential doctrines of salvation.

Commands do not necessarily prove fallen man's ability.

Human reason must remain subordinate to revelation.

God's foreknowledge is infallible.

God's sovereignty cannot be reduced to passive observation.

With these principles established, Luther is ready to address the central claim itself.

What is free will?

Does fallen man possess it?

And if the will is not free, what does it mean to say that it is bound?

Those questions take us into the central argument of Luther's book.

CHAPTER 17

What Luther Means by the Bondage of the Will

We have now reached the central argument of Luther's book.

The title ***The Bondage of the Will*** can easily be misunderstood

if the word bondage is taken to mean that human beings possess no will, make no choices, or are physically compelled to act against their desires.

That is not Luther's principal argument.

As we saw earlier, Luther recognised that human beings make genuine choices in ordinary life. The controversy with Erasmus concerned something much more specific:

> **What power does the will of fallen man possess in those things which concern God and salvation?**

Luther's answer is uncompromising.

Fallen man possesses a will, but that will is not spiritually free. It is bound by sin and cannot, by its own natural power, turn itself towards God, produce saving faith, or prepare itself for salvation.

If the sinner is to come to Christ, God must act.

The Meaning of Bondage

The word bondage describes slavery or servitude.

Luther's terminology therefore reflects biblical language concerning man's relationship to sin.

Christ says:

> *"Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin."*
>
> — John 8:34

Paul similarly writes:

> *"Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey?"*
>
> — Romans 6:16

And he reminds believers:

> *"For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness."*
>
> — Romans 6:20

The biblical picture is therefore stronger than saying merely that fallen men occasionally make poor choices.

They are described as servants of sin.

For Luther, this language was incompatible with a spiritually neutral will standing independently between God and sin.

The Will Still Acts

Bondage does not mean inactivity.

A slave still acts.

Likewise, fallen man thinks, desires, chooses and acts.

The crucial point is that his choices proceed from his fallen nature.

A sinful man does not normally sin because some external power physically forces him to perform actions he desperately wishes to avoid.

He sins willingly.

This distinction is essential to Luther's argument.

The will is bound, but it is still a will.

Necessity and Compulsion

Luther therefore makes an important distinction between necessity and compulsion.

These words must not be treated as though they mean the same thing.

Compulsion would mean that a person is forced externally to act contrary to what he actually wants.

Suppose a man's hand were physically seized and used against his will. His action would be compelled.

That is not how Luther describes fallen man's sin.

The sinner acts according to what he wants.

The necessity arises from the condition of his nature.

This is sometimes called necessity of inclination rather than external coercion.

The sinner sins willingly because his will is sinful.

A Simple Illustration

Consider a person who hates a particular food.

He is physically capable of eating it.

Nothing external prevents him.

Yet when freely choosing his meal, he consistently rejects it because he does not desire it.

His choice proceeds from his preference.

The illustration is imperfect, because spiritual corruption is far more serious than personal taste, but it helps us see Luther's distinction.

The problem is not always that a person is prevented from doing what he wants.

The problem may lie in what he wants.

This is why Scripture's language concerning the heart becomes so important.

"Ye Will Not Come"

Christ says:

"And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life."

— John 5:40

Notice that Christ does not describe people desperately wanting to come to Him but being prevented by some external barrier.

He says:

"ye will not."

Yet elsewhere He says:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

— John 6:44

Here we have the two ideas together.

In John 5:

they will not come.

In John 6:

they cannot come unless drawn by the Father.

For Luther, this combination was highly significant.

The inability is connected with the will.

Moral Inability

Later theologians have often described this as moral inability.

The expression can be useful provided it is properly understood.

It does not mean that man's inability is imaginary.

Nor does it mean that man possesses full spiritual ability but merely needs encouragement.

It means that his inability arises from his sinful moral nature rather than from an external physical restraint.

The sinner cannot produce holy desires from an unholy heart.

Christ asks:

"Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?"

— Matthew 7:16

The nature determines the fruit.

Could Man Simply Change His Own Nature?

Erasmus's position raises an obvious question.

If man's will is inclined away from God, can he use that same will to change its own fundamental spiritual inclination?

Luther believed this merely moved the problem one stage backwards.

Suppose we say:

The sinner must first choose to change his will.

Where does that first spiritually good choice come from?

If it arises naturally from the fallen will, then the fallen will has already produced a movement towards God.

The very ability under dispute has simply been assumed.

Luther instead appeals to God's action.

The heart itself must be changed.

A New Heart

The promise in Ezekiel is therefore especially relevant:

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."

— Ezekiel 36:26

The language does not present fallen man repairing his own heart.

God says:

"I will give."

and:

"I will put."

The following verse continues:

"And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes."

— Ezekiel 36:27

For Luther, this is the character of saving grace.

God does not merely advise the old heart to improve itself.

He acts upon man.

God Works in the Will

Paul expresses the principle directly:

"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

— Philippians 2:13

The verse does not say merely that God helps people accomplish what they have first independently willed.

God works:

"both to will and to do."

The will itself therefore comes within the operation of grace.

This does not destroy human willing.

It produces it.

When God changes the sinner, the sinner genuinely wills differently.

Grace Does Not Drag the Sinner Unwillingly

This point deserves emphasis.

The doctrine of bondage does not require us to imagine a man crying:

I desperately want Christ, but God will not allow me to come.

Christ's promise is:

"Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."

— John 6:37

The problem of fallen man is not that Christ rejects those who genuinely come to Him.

The problem is why the sinner comes at all.

The same passage gives Luther's answer:

"All that the Father giveth me shall come to me."

— John 6:37

Those whom the Father gives come.

And when they come, they come willingly.

Grace changes rather than abolishes the will.

Luther's Famous Beast Illustration

At this point we encounter one of the most memorable—and most controversial—illustrations in ***The Bondage of the Will***.

Luther compares the human will to a beast of burden.

In his illustration, the human will is like an animal ridden either by God or by Satan.

If God rides, the creature goes where God wills.

If Satan rides, it goes where Satan wills.

The human will, Luther says, does not possess the power simply to choose which rider it will have.

The image is deliberately extreme.

Luther intended it to destroy the idea of the will as an autonomous spiritual power standing independently between two competing masters.

What Luther Is Trying to Say

The underlying point can be understood from biblical categories.

Christ says:

> *"No man can serve two masters."*
>
> — Matthew 6:24

Paul describes men as either servants of sin or servants of righteousness.

He writes:

> *"But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you."*
>
> — Romans 6:17

Then:

> *"Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness."*
>
> — Romans 6:18

There is a transfer of lordship.

The Christian has been delivered from one dominion into another.

Paul similarly writes:

> *"Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son."*

— Colossians 1:13

Luther's illustration attempts to capture this lack of spiritual neutrality.

Where the Illustration Can Mislead

Nevertheless, the beast illustration must not be pressed beyond its purpose.

A human being is not literally an irrational animal controlled mechanically by an external rider.

Scripture treats men as moral agents.

They think.

They intend.

They desire.

They act.

They are commanded.

They are warned.

They are held responsible.

Therefore, if Luther's illustration were interpreted to mean that Satan physically controls an innocent human being who has no participation in his own sin, it would be seriously misleading.

That is not an inference we should draw.

The sinner's own heart is involved.

Satan and Human Sin

Scripture certainly teaches that Satan exercises influence in the world.

Paul describes Satan as:

"the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience."

— Ephesians 2:2

But the very next verse speaks of those same people:

"fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind."

— Ephesians 2:3

Both realities are present.

There is satanic influence.

There are also human desires.

Scripture does not allow the sinner to excuse himself by saying:

Satan made me do it.

The sinful desires are genuinely his.

James and the Source of Temptation

James makes this especially clear:

"But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed."

— James 1:14

The words:

"his own lust"

are important.

Whatever place Satan may have in temptation, the sinner's own corrupt desires remain morally significant.

Therefore Luther's beast illustration must be interpreted alongside the fuller biblical testimony.

The will is not autonomous.

But neither is man an innocent puppet.

Is the Will Neutral?

This is perhaps the most important question raised by Luther's illustration.

Can the human will be spiritually neutral?

Luther says no.

Christ teaches:

"He that is not with me is against me."

— Matthew 12:30

There is no independent spiritual territory in which fallen man stands neither under sin nor under grace, waiting to determine which side he will join.

Paul similarly contrasts two states:

in the flesh

and:

in the Spirit.

He writes:

"So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God."

— Romans 8:8

Again the language concerns ability:

"cannot please God."

This was precisely the kind of statement Luther believed incompatible with Erasmus's remaining power of free choice.

The Strong Man Must Be Overcome

Another biblical image helps explain Luther's position.

Christ speaks of the strong man:

"When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace:

But when a stronger than he shall come upon him, and overcome him..."

— Luke 11:21–22

Deliverance occurs because a stronger one intervenes.

The captive does not liberate himself.

For Luther, salvation similarly requires divine intervention.

Christ does not merely advise slaves how to become free.

He liberates them.

"If the Son Shall Make You Free"

This gives the positive side of the doctrine.

Christ says:

"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

— John 8:36

The bondage of the will is therefore not Luther's final message.

The final message is liberation in Christ.

Man cannot free himself.

But Christ can free him.

This is why Luther's doctrine should not be understood merely as pessimism concerning human nature.

Its purpose is to magnify the necessity and power of grace.

The Will After Grace

What happens when God saves?

The will is not abolished.

It is renewed.

The believer begins to desire what previously he did not desire.

This does not mean that all sinful desires immediately disappear.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, the Christian continues to experience conflict between flesh and Spirit.

But the relationship has changed.

Paul says:

"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

— Philippians 2:13

Grace therefore creates willing obedience.

True spiritual freedom is not independence from God.

It is freedom from slavery to sin so that man may willingly serve God.

Adam and Free Will

At this point we should distinguish fallen man from Adam before the Fall.

Luther's argument concerning bondage principally concerns man after Adam's fall.

Adam was not created spiritually dead.

God created man upright.

The bondage of sin is therefore not an essential feature of being human.

It is a consequence of the Fall.

This distinction protects the goodness of God's original creation.

God did not create Adam sinful and then condemn him for being what God had created him to be.

Sin entered through man's fall.

The Christian and Freedom

A further distinction concerns the regenerated believer.

The Christian has been liberated from the dominion of sin, but he has not yet reached sinless perfection.

His freedom is real but not yet consummated.

He can therefore say with Paul:

"I delight in the law of God after the inward man."

— Romans 7:22

There is now a genuine delight in God which was not produced by the natural hostility of the flesh.

Grace has changed the relationship.

Luther's Strong Language

Luther sometimes states his argument so strongly that readers may wonder whether any meaningful human agency remains.

This is one reason ***The Bondage of the Will*** requires careful reading.

Luther was writing polemically.

He wanted to leave Erasmus no refuge in vague language concerning a tiny remaining power of free will.

Consequently, he often pushes his formulations to their sharpest possible expression.

We should understand what he is trying to defend without assuming that every rhetorical formulation provides the best possible theological definition.

Scripture Remains the Standard

Here the method of this companion volume becomes particularly important.

We are not asking:

Can Luther's language be defended at all costs?

We are asking:

What does Scripture teach?

Scripture certainly teaches:

that man is fallen;

that he is a servant of sin;

that the carnal mind is hostile to God;

that no man can come to Christ unless the Father draws him;

that God must give spiritual life;

and that salvation is of grace.

These truths provide substantial biblical support for Luther's rejection of an autonomous spiritual will.

But Scripture also teaches:

that man willingly sins;

that he is morally responsible;

that God commands all men to repent;

that unbelief is blameworthy;

and that God Himself is holy and does no evil.

A sound doctrine must preserve all of these truths.

Where We Must Be Careful

The danger appears when we attempt to solve the mystery by sacrificing one side of the biblical testimony.

If we preserve human responsibility by making fallen man spiritually autonomous, we risk denying the biblical teaching concerning his bondage and the necessity of grace.

If we preserve sovereignty by describing man as an innocent machine with no meaningful willing of his own, we risk denying biblical responsibility.

Luther's great strength is his refusal to weaken grace in order to preserve an imagined autonomous human will.

His strongest language, however, must still be examined where it appears to go beyond what Scripture explicitly states.

The Central Claim

We can now state the central doctrine of ***The Bondage of the Will*** more precisely:

> **Fallen man possesses a real will and acts voluntarily, but his will is enslaved to sin and cannot by its own natural power produce saving faith or turn itself towards God. Salvation therefore requires the prior and effective work of divine grace, which renews the sinner so that he willingly comes to Christ.**

This is substantially more precise than saying simply:

Man has no free will.

The latter expression can easily mislead unless we explain in what sense, in what sphere, and in what condition of man Luther is speaking.

The Question Now Becomes More Difficult

But Luther's argument does not stop with man's sinful nature.

He now moves into more difficult territory.

If man's will is bound, how does God's sovereign will relate to everything that occurs?

What does it mean when Scripture says that God hardens Pharaoh?

Did Pharaoh harden himself?

Did God harden him?

Can both be true?

And if God hardens, how can Pharaoh remain responsible?

This is one of the principal biblical battlegrounds between Luther and Erasmus.

The answer takes us into the account of Moses and Pharaoh and then directly into Paul's argument in Romans 9.

CHAPTER 18

Pharaoh and the Hardening of the Heart

Among the biblical passages discussed in ***The Bondage of the Will***, few are more difficult than those concerning Pharaoh and the hardening of his heart.

The account presents us with statements that must all be taken seriously.

Scripture says that Pharaoh hardened his heart.

It also says that Pharaoh's heart was hardened.

And repeatedly it says that the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Paul later takes up the same history in Romans 9 and declares:

> *"Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth."*
>
> — Romans 9:18

For Luther, these passages presented a formidable challenge to Erasmus's defence of free will.

But they also raise difficult questions for Luther's own position.

What does it mean for God to harden a man's heart?

Does God create evil within an otherwise righteous man?

If Pharaoh acts according to God's sovereign purpose, how can Pharaoh remain responsible?

And does the biblical account permit us to distinguish between God's action and Pharaoh's own wickedness?

These questions require careful attention to the whole biblical account rather than to a single verse.

Pharaoh Before Moses

The story of Pharaoh's hardening does not begin with a morally neutral man.

Before Moses confronts Pharaoh, the king of Egypt is already oppressing Israel.

Exodus records:

"And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in morter, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field."

— Exodus 1:14

Pharaoh had also commanded that the Hebrew male children should be killed.

He was therefore not an innocent ruler who loved righteousness until God suddenly implanted wickedness within him.

This is an important starting point.

The Pharaoh whom God hardens is already a sinful and oppressive king.

God Announces the Hardening

Before Moses returns to Egypt, God tells him:

"When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go."

— Exodus 4:21

This statement occurs before the series of confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh.

The hardening therefore cannot be explained entirely as something God decided to do only after Pharaoh had repeatedly hardened himself.

God announces beforehand:

"I will harden his heart."

Any interpretation of the account must take this statement seriously.

Luther certainly did.

Pharaoh's Responsibility

Yet when Moses and Aaron first confront Pharaoh, Pharaoh responds willingly:

"Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the LORD, neither will I let Israel go."

— Exodus 5:2

Nothing in the text suggests that Pharaoh wishes to obey God but is prevented from doing so against his will.

His response expresses pride and defiance.

He asks:

"Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice?"

The rebellion is genuinely Pharaoh's.

This is essential if we are to understand biblical hardening without turning Pharaoh into an innocent victim.

Three Ways the Hardening Is Described

As the plagues proceed, Exodus describes Pharaoh's heart in several ways.

Sometimes Pharaoh himself is explicitly said to harden his heart.

For example:

"But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart, and hearkened not unto them."

— Exodus 8:15

Later:

"And Pharaoh hardened his heart at this time also, neither would he let the people go."

— Exodus 8:32

At other points the text simply says that Pharaoh's heart was hardened.

And elsewhere God is explicitly the subject:

"And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh."

— Exodus 9:12

These statements must not be made to contradict one another.

Scripture attributes the hardening both to Pharaoh and to God.

A Common Explanation

A common explanation is that Pharaoh first hardened his own heart repeatedly and that God only later responded by hardening him judicially.

There is some truth in emphasising the judicial character of God's hardening. Pharaoh is unquestionably guilty and repeatedly resists God's command.

However, the explanation becomes inadequate if it suggests that God's hardening was merely an afterthought caused by Pharaoh's unexpected resistance.

God had already declared before the confrontation:

"I will harden his heart."

— Exodus 4:21

Later He says:

"And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt."

— Exodus 7:3

God's sovereign purpose therefore precedes the later narrative.

This was particularly important to Luther.

Erasmus and the Hardening

Erasmus naturally wished to interpret the hardening in a way that preserved human free choice and protected God from any suggestion that He caused evil.

One way of understanding such language is to say that God hardens by permitting a sinner to continue in his own wickedness or by withdrawing grace.

On this reading, God does not actively create Pharaoh's evil disposition.

He leaves Pharaoh to himself, and Pharaoh hardens himself.

There is a legitimate theological concern behind this interpretation.

Scripture plainly teaches that God is holy and cannot be made the author of sin.

But Luther believed Erasmus weakened the force of the biblical words.

The text does not merely say:

God permitted Pharaoh to harden himself.

It says:

"the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh."

Luther insisted that the statement must be allowed to mean something real.

Luther's Objection

Luther's objection is characteristic of his method throughout ***The Bondage of the Will***.

When Scripture speaks plainly, he resists interpretations which appear to soften the text in order to preserve a prior philosophical

understanding of free will.

If Moses says:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart,"

Luther asks why we should turn the words into:

I will permit Pharaoh to harden himself.

The latter may be part of an explanation, but it is not what the words themselves say.

For Luther, God's action must be taken seriously.

But What Does God Actually Do?

Here we reach the difficult question.

If God genuinely hardens Pharaoh, what does that mean?

It cannot mean that God places moral evil into a righteous heart.

Scripture forbids such a conclusion.

James writes:

"God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man."

— James 1:13

And:

"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above."

— James 1:17

God is not morally corrupt.

Therefore God's hardening must be understood in a way consistent with His holiness.

The Sun and the Clay

An illustration sometimes used in discussions of hardening is that the same sun which melts wax also hardens clay.

The difference lies in the material upon which the sun acts.

The illustration has some usefulness.

God's righteous commands and judgments do not introduce sin into Pharaoh from outside.

They confront a heart that is already proud and rebellious.

The more Pharaoh encounters God's demand:

"Let my people go,"

the more his opposition is exposed.

But we should not allow an illustration to replace the biblical

text.

Scripture goes beyond saying that Pharaoh merely reacted badly to neutral circumstances.

It explicitly attributes hardening to God.

Judicial Hardening

A useful biblical category is judicial hardening.

God may judge sinners by giving them over to the consequences of their own rebellion.

Romans 1 provides a clear example.

Paul repeatedly says:

"God also gave them up."

— Romans 1:24

and:

"God gave them over to a reprobate mind."

— Romans 1:28

The sinners act according to their own corrupt desires.

Yet God's judgment is also active: He gives them over.

This helps us understand how divine action and human wickedness can operate together without making God morally evil.

God judges.

The sinner sins.

Pharaoh as an Instrument of God's Purpose

Paul takes the argument further in Romans 9.

He writes:

> *"For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth."*

— Romans 9:17

Pharaoh therefore occupies a place within God's purpose.

God's confrontation with Egypt is not an accidental struggle whose outcome remains uncertain.

God intends to reveal His power and make His name known.

The Exodus is an act of judgment upon Egypt and deliverance for Israel.

Pharaoh's resistance becomes the occasion upon which God's power is displayed.

"Whom He Will He Hardeneth"

Paul then draws his conclusion:

> *"Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth."*
>
> — Romans 9:18

This is one of the strongest statements in the controversy.

Paul does not say merely:

God has mercy upon those who first make themselves suitable for mercy, and hardens only after discovering what autonomous human wills will do.

The emphasis falls upon God's will.

For Luther, this directly challenged Erasmus.

If the final explanation lies in man's independent free choice, why does Paul express the matter in terms of God's mercy and hardening?

The Objection Paul Anticipates

The next verse is especially significant:

> *"Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?"*
>
> — Romans 9:19

This is remarkably close to the objection naturally raised against Luther.

If God's will is sovereign, how can God still find fault?

Paul clearly recognises the difficulty.

The objection is not imaginary.

It arises from the argument Paul has just made.

His immediate response is:

> *"Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?"*
>
> — Romans 9:20

Paul therefore refuses to place God under man's judgment.

The Potter and the Clay

Paul continues:

> *"Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou*

made me thus?"

— Romans 9:20

Then:

"Hath not the potter power over the clay?"

— Romans 9:21

For Luther, this language reinforced the distinction between Creator and creature.

God is not required to submit His sovereign purposes to the judgment of fallen human reason.

The creature cannot place himself above the Creator.

Yet once again we must read the whole biblical testimony.

God's sovereignty does not mean His actions are arbitrary wickedness.

The Potter is righteous.

God's Purpose in Pharaoh

The Exodus account itself tells us why God permits and hardens Pharaoh's resistance.

God says:

"And in very deed for this cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee my power; and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth."

— Exodus 9:16

The purpose is the revelation of God's power and name.

The plagues demonstrate that the gods of Egypt cannot deliver.

Pharaoh cannot successfully resist the God of Israel.

Israel's deliverance will not ultimately be credited to Moses' political skill or Pharaoh's generosity.

God delivers His people.

Did God Force Pharaoh to Desire Evil?

The biblical account gives us no reason to say so.

Pharaoh's evil desires are genuinely his own.

He wishes to retain Israel in bondage.

He repeatedly breaks his word.

He refuses God's command.

God's hardening does not need to be understood as the creation

of wicked desires in an innocent man.

Rather, God sovereignly deals with an already sinful ruler in such a way that Pharaoh's existing rebellion is confirmed and used within God's judicial purpose.

This preserves an important distinction:

God's purpose is righteous; Pharaoh's purpose is wicked.

Joseph Provides a Parallel

We encountered a similar principle earlier in the account of Joseph.

Joseph tells his brothers:

"But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good."

— Genesis 50:20

One event contains two intentions.

The brothers intend evil.

God intends good.

God's sovereign purpose does not become evil merely because sinful men participate in the event with wicked intentions.

This principle helps us approach Pharaoh.

Pharaoh's rebellion is his.

God's purpose in governing and judging that rebellion is God's.

The Crucifixion Provides an Even Stronger Example

The clearest example is the death of Christ.

Peter says:

"Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain."

— Acts 2:23

The crucifixion occurred according to:

"the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God."

Yet those who crucified Christ acted with:

"wicked hands."

God's sovereign purpose and human responsibility therefore meet in the same event without becoming morally identical.

God's purpose in the cross is holy and redemptive.

The intentions of those who murdered Christ are wicked.

Where Luther Is Strongest

Luther's treatment of Pharaoh is strongest when he refuses to empty God's hardening of real meaning.

The biblical text does not allow us to reduce God's sovereignty to passive observation.

God declares beforehand:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart."

Paul later says:

"whom he will he hardeneth."

Any doctrine of providence must account honestly for those statements.

Luther is right to insist that they cannot simply be rewritten because they make us uncomfortable.

Where Luther Requires Careful Reading

Yet Luther's determination to defend divine sovereignty sometimes leads him to expressions which require careful qualification.

If his language is taken to imply that God works evil in man in exactly the same moral sense that man commits evil, we would have gone beyond what Scripture permits.

Scripture distinguishes God's righteous action from man's sinful intention.

Therefore we should not collapse the distinction merely in order to produce a simpler philosophical system.

The mystery may remain.

God sovereignly governs.

Pharaoh willingly rebels.

God hardens.

Pharaoh hardens his own heart.

God remains righteous.

Pharaoh remains guilty.

Scripture affirms all of these.

Hardening as Judgment

There is also a solemn warning in the doctrine of hardening.

Persistent rejection of God's truth is not spiritually harmless.

Pharaoh repeatedly resists the Word of God.

His resistance does not leave him in some permanently neutral condition.

His heart becomes hardened.

The New Testament gives similar warnings.

Hebrews says:

"To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts."

— Hebrews 3:15

The command assumes human responsibility.

Men are warned not to harden themselves.

Yet the account of Pharaoh reminds us that hardening may also become an act of divine judgment.

This should make unbelief a matter of great seriousness.

The Gospel Should Not Be Delayed

The doctrine therefore has practical consequences.

A person should not reason:

I shall reject God now and repent whenever I choose later.

Such thinking assumes precisely the autonomous power over one's spiritual condition that Luther denies.

Scripture says:

"Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

— 2 Corinthians 6:2

The proper response to God's Word is not speculation concerning hidden decrees.

It is repentance and faith.

Pharaoh and Free Will

What, then, does Pharaoh prove in Luther's argument?

At minimum, the account makes it difficult to maintain that human history is governed by autonomous wills operating independently of God's sovereign purpose.

God announces what He will do.

God raises Pharaoh up for a purpose.

God hardens.

Pharaoh nevertheless acts willingly and remains guilty.

This is precisely the combination Luther wishes Erasmus to confront.

Human responsibility does not require independence from divine sovereignty.

A Balanced Conclusion

We should therefore resist two opposite errors.

The first says:

> **Pharaoh alone hardens himself; God's hardening means nothing more than passive observation.**

That does not adequately account for the explicit language of Exodus and Romans.

The second says:

> **God creates wickedness in an innocent Pharaoh and then condemns him for what God alone caused.**

That does not adequately account for Pharaoh's prior wickedness, his voluntary rebellion, or the holiness of God.

The biblical account is more profound than either simplification.

> **Pharaoh is already a sinful ruler who willingly opposes God. God sovereignly and judicially hardens him, using Pharaoh's rebellion to accomplish His own righteous purpose and reveal His power. Pharaoh's sin remains Pharaoh's, while God's purpose remains holy.**

That conclusion preserves the principal elements of the biblical testimony without pretending that every mystery has been removed.

Luther's Larger Argument

For Luther, however, Pharaoh is only one part of the case.

The fundamental question remains man's spiritual ability.

If Pharaoh cannot successfully resist God's ultimate purpose, and if mercy itself depends upon God who shows mercy, what becomes of Erasmus's power of free choice?

Luther now turns increasingly to passages which describe fallen man's condition directly.

Is man merely weak?

Is he spiritually wounded but still capable of beginning his return to God?

Or does Scripture describe something much more radical?

Paul's language is uncompromising:

"There is none righteous, no, not one."

"There is none that seeketh after God."

And elsewhere:

"You... were dead in trespasses and sins."

These statements take us from the particular example of Pharaoh back to the universal condition of fallen mankind.

And they bring Luther to another major part of his argument against Erasmus.

CHAPTER 19

"There Is None That Seeketh After God"

Luther's argument against free will does not rest upon the example of Pharaoh alone.

Pharaoh is a particularly striking case because Scripture speaks explicitly of divine hardening. But Erasmus's definition of free choice concerned mankind generally. Luther therefore had to ask a broader question:

What does Scripture actually say about the natural spiritual condition of fallen man?

Is man spiritually weak but still able to make the first movement towards God?

Does there remain within him a small power by which he may prepare himself for grace?

Or is the biblical description more radical?

For Luther, Paul's argument in Romans 3 was decisive.

"There is none righteous, no, not one:

There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God."

— Romans 3:10–11

Luther believed these words struck directly at Erasmus's attempt to preserve even a limited spiritual power in fallen man's will.

Paul does not say that man seeks God inadequately.

He says:

"There is none that seeketh after God."

If that statement is taken seriously, Luther asks, what remains of the natural power by which fallen man is supposed to turn himself towards salvation?

Paul's Argument in Romans

The context of Romans 3 is important.

Paul is establishing the universal guilt of mankind.

He has already addressed the Gentile world in Romans 1 and the morally or religiously confident man in Romans 2.

By Romans 3 he brings the argument together:

"For we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin."

— Romans 3:9

The expression is significant:

"under sin."

Paul does not merely say that all men have occasionally committed sinful acts.

They are under sin.

Sin is presented almost as a ruling power.

This fits naturally with the language we have already encountered concerning slavery.

"None Righteous"

Paul continues:

"There is none righteous, no, not one."

— Romans 3:10

The universality is deliberate.

None.

No, not one.

Paul is removing every ground for human boasting before God.

This does not mean that every human being is equally wicked in outward conduct.

Some people are plainly more moral, generous or law-abiding than others.

The question is man's standing before the holy God.

Measured by that standard:

"There is none righteous."

"None That Understandeth"

Paul then says:

"There is none that understandeth."

— Romans 3:11

Again, this cannot mean that fallen people possess no intellectual abilities.

Unbelievers may be extraordinarily intelligent.

They may excel in philosophy, mathematics, literature, medicine, government and countless other disciplines.

Paul is speaking in the context of man's relationship to God.

Fallen intellectual ability does not naturally produce saving knowledge of God.

This distinction corresponds closely to Luther's earlier distinction between man's abilities in earthly matters and his inability in spiritual matters.

A man may possess a brilliant mind and still remain alienated from God.

"None That Seeketh After God"

Then comes the statement most directly relevant to the controversy:

"There is none that seeketh after God."

Erasmus's definition of free choice had attributed to man's will some power by which he might apply himself towards the things leading to salvation.

Luther asks how such a power can be reconciled with Paul's statement.

If fallen man naturally possesses a movement towards God, why does Paul say that none seeks after God?

For Luther, the two propositions could not simply be allowed to

stand side by side without explanation.

Either Paul's statement must be weakened, or the natural spiritual power attributed to free will must be abandoned.

Luther chooses the latter.

But Do People Not Seek God?

An obvious objection arises.

Human history is full of religion.

People pray.

They worship.

They undertake pilgrimages.

They practise religious disciplines.

They search for spiritual meaning.

Surely this demonstrates that human beings seek God.

Luther's answer requires us to distinguish between religious activity and genuinely seeking God as He has revealed Himself.

Paul himself knew that men were religious.

He encountered an abundance of religion in the ancient world.

Yet he still wrote:

"There is none that seeketh after God."

Therefore the existence of religion cannot by itself overturn his statement.

Religious Man Can Still Be Fallen

This point would have had particular force for Luther because of his own experience.

The young Luther had not been irreligious.

He had entered a monastery.

He prayed.

He fasted.

He confessed.

He studied theology.

He participated seriously in the religious life available to him.

Yet he later came to believe that religious activity itself could become an attempt to establish righteousness apart from the Gospel.

A man can therefore be intensely religious while still misunderstanding the righteousness of God.

Paul says concerning Israel:

"For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge."

— Romans 10:2

Zeal alone does not prove spiritual life.

"They Are All Gone Out of the Way"

Romans 3 continues:

"They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one."

— Romans 3:12

Again the universality is unmistakable.

Paul's purpose is to remove every claim by which man might establish his own righteousness before God.

This prepares for his later conclusion:

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight."

— Romans 3:20

The diagnosis of human corruption prepares the way for justification by grace.

Paul's Use of the Psalms

Paul's words in Romans 3 draw heavily upon the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms.

For example:

"The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good."

— Psalm 14:1

And:

"The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God."

— Psalm 14:2

The conclusion follows:

"They are all gone aside."

— Psalm 14:3

Paul therefore does not invent a new pessimistic anthropology.

He gathers together an existing biblical testimony concerning fallen mankind.

What Does "None" Mean?

Luther's argument presses the universal terms.

If Scripture says:

"none righteous,"

"none that understandeth,"

and:

"none that seeketh after God,"

we should not quietly introduce an exception:

except for the small natural power of free will by which man begins to seek God before grace acts.

Luther asks where Scripture teaches such an exception.

This is characteristic of his controversy with Erasmus.

He demands not merely a plausible philosophical explanation but biblical evidence.

The Question of the "Small Something"

Erasmus's position was deliberately modest.

He did not attribute the whole of salvation to man's will.

Grace remained necessary.

But Luther believed the size of man's contribution was not the fundamental issue.

Suppose salvation is represented as almost entirely the work of God, but man retains one small independent ability by which he turns himself towards grace.

Luther's question is:

Where did that spiritually good movement come from?

If it came from fallen man independently of grace, then fallen man has produced something spiritually good which Scripture appears to deny him.

If it came from grace, then it is no longer an independent power of free will.

This is why Luther refuses to be satisfied with a very small concession to human ability.

Dead in Trespasses and Sins

Paul's language in Ephesians is even stronger:

"And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins."

— Ephesians 2:1

The metaphor is death.

Again, it must be interpreted carefully.

Paul deliberately uses the language of death to describe the sinner's condition before God. As with every use of the word "death" in Scripture, its meaning must be determined by the context.

"According to the course of this world."

— Ephesians 2:2

When Paul writes that fallen men are "dead in trespasses and sins," he is not teaching that the human spirit has ceased to exist or become incapable of activity. On the contrary, the unregenerate man continues to think, reason, choose, love, hate, invent, worship, and pursue the affairs of this present world. His mind remains active, his conscience continues to accuse or excuse him, and his will is constantly exercised according to his own desires. The fallen angels themselves are active, intelligent, and conscious, yet they remain utterly separated from the favour of God.

All these faculties were created by God and originally given to Adam for His glory. The Fall did not destroy them; it corrupted them. They no longer fulfil the purpose for which they were created. Instead of loving God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength, fallen man lives for himself, and every faculty of his being bears the effects of sin.

"The expression 'dead in trespasses and sins' therefore describes man's judicial and moral condition before God rather than the inactivity or extinction of his immaterial nature." Fallen man is not spiritually inactive; he is spiritually alienated from the God who created him.

The First Sacrifice and God's Provision

Another remarkable feature of the Genesis narrative deserves careful attention. After pronouncing judgment upon the serpent,

the woman, and the man, the LORD Himself made coats of skins and clothed Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21). This provision did not originate with Adam. It was neither his invention nor his offering. It was God's gracious provision for guilty sinners.

The making of these garments required the death of an innocent animal. Although Genesis does not expressly explain the significance of this act, the analogy of Scripture points to a profound theological truth. The first recorded death after the Fall was not the death of Adam but the death of another, provided by God Himself. Many Christian interpreters have therefore understood this event as the first foreshadowing of substitutionary sacrifice, anticipating the whole sacrificial system and ultimately the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

This provision beautifully displays both the righteousness and the mercy of God. The sentence pronounced in Eden was not set aside, for "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Yet God, according to His eternal purpose, did not immediately execute the full penalty upon Adam and Eve. Instead, in the very midst of judgment, He announced the coming Seed who would bruise the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15), and He Himself provided a covering for guilty sinners.

Here we see a principle that runs throughout the whole of Scripture. Reconciliation with God never begins with man; it begins with God. Man hides; God seeks. Man stands guilty; God pronounces the promise. Man cannot cover his shame; God provides the covering. In the fullness of time, God Himself provided His own Son as the perfect and final sacrifice for sin. Salvation, from beginning to end, is therefore the work of God's sovereign grace.

This truth lies at the very heart of Luther's doctrine. Fallen man contributes nothing to the restoration of the fellowship he has lost. Just as Adam did not provide the sacrifice that covered his nakedness, so the sinner cannot provide the righteousness by which he is accepted before God. Both the provision and the initiative belong entirely to God. Who Makes the Dead Alive?

The answer appears a few verses later:

"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he

loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ."

— Ephesians 2:4–5

The contrast is powerful.

We were dead.

God made us alive.

The subject of the saving action is God.

This fits precisely with Luther's argument concerning grace.

The sinner does not make himself alive and then receive divine assistance.

God quickens.

How Does Scripture Use the Word "Death"?

The Scriptures employ the word death in a variety of ways. The meaning must always be determined by the context in which it is used. It is therefore a mistake to assume that every occurrence of the word refers to exactly the same reality.

James writes:"For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

James 2:26

Here death is the separation of the spirit from the body. James is describing physical death.

Paul, however, writes:"And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins."

Ephesians 2:1Here the Apostle is not describing the separation of the spirit from the body, for those to whom he writes were physically alive. Rather, he describes the fallen condition of mankind before God, alienated from His fellowship and unable to restore themselves to His favour.

Again, speaking of his own ministry, Paul says:

"In deaths oft."

2 Corinthians 11:23

He is not claiming to have died repeatedly, but that he was continually exposed to mortal danger for the sake of the gospel.

Likewise, during the plague of darkness Pharaoh pleaded with Moses:

"Entreat the LORD your God, that he may take away from me this death only."

Exodus 10:17

Here the word death describes the dreadful judgment that had fallen upon Egypt.

Finally, Scripture speaks of "the second death."

"And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death."

Revelation 20:14

This refers to the everlasting punishment awaiting those who die outside of Jesus Christ.

These passages demonstrate that the word death is not confined to a single meaning. Scripture speaks of physical death, of being "dead in trespasses and sins," of continual exposure to death, of death as a divine judgment, and of the second death. The context alone determines the sense in which the word is to be understood.

It is therefore important to allow Scripture to define its own language. Rather than imposing one theological definition upon every occurrence of the word death, we should carefully observe how the biblical writers themselves employ the term.

We should nevertheless avoid pressing the metaphor beyond Scripture.

A physically dead body neither thinks nor chooses.

A spiritually dead sinner does both.

Therefore it would be misleading to argue:

A corpse can do absolutely nothing physically; therefore an unbeliever can perform no action whatsoever.

Paul himself describes spiritually dead people as actively living in sin.

The point concerns spiritual life towards God.

They cannot produce that life from themselves.

This distinction keeps Luther's argument from becoming a

caricature.

The Carnal Mind

Romans 8 provides another important passage:

"Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be."

— Romans 8:7

Paul again moves from fact to ability.

The carnal mind:

"is not subject"

and:

"neither indeed can be."

Then he concludes:

"So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God."

— Romans 8:8

The repeated word cannot is significant.

This is more than unwillingness considered in isolation.

It is inability arising from man's fallen condition.

Enmity Against God

Paul's description is also stronger than spiritual indifference.

The carnal mind is:

"enmity against God."

This helps explain why Luther rejects the picture of the natural will as spiritually neutral.

The fallen sinner is not standing midway between God and sin, equally disposed towards either.

His nature is alienated from God.

Therefore salvation requires more than the presentation of two alternatives to a neutral decision-maker.

The heart must be renewed.

"No Man Can Say"

Paul gives another relevant statement:

"No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost."

— 1 Corinthians 12:3

This cannot mean that an unbeliever is physically incapable of pronouncing the words "Jesus is Lord."

The point concerns genuine spiritual confession.

Such confession requires the work of the Holy Ghost.

Again, spiritual good is attributed to divine operation rather than unaided human nature.

No Man Can Come

Christ's words in John 6 remain central:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

— John 6:44

If Luther had only Romans 3, Erasmus might attempt to argue that man's failure to seek God described what people ordinarily do rather than what they are capable of doing.

But John 6 explicitly addresses ability:

"No man can come."

The exception is:

"except the Father... draw him."

For Luther, this is exceedingly difficult to reconcile with a natural spiritual power of free will.

"Without Me Ye Can Do Nothing"

Christ tells His disciples:

"Without me ye can do nothing."

— John 15:5

The immediate context concerns fruitfulness in union with Christ, and the verse should not be removed carelessly from that context.

Nevertheless, the principle is consistent with the wider biblical testimony.

Spiritual fruit does not arise independently of Christ.

The branch bears fruit because it abides in the vine.

Life flows from the source.

The Father Must Draw

The word draw in John 6 became important in debates concerning grace.

Does God merely invite?

Does He provide assistance which leaves the decisive movement entirely to the sinner?

Or does the Father's drawing actually bring people to Christ?

The surrounding passage is significant.

Christ says:

"All that the Father giveth me shall come to me."

— John 6:37

Not merely:

they may come.

But:

"shall come."

And later:

"Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me."

— John 6:45

Luther saw here an effective divine work.

The Father's teaching and drawing produce coming.

Does This Remove the Call to Believe?

No.

Scripture simultaneously commands sinners to believe.

The same Gospel of John says:

"That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

— John 3:15

The doctrine of inability must not be used to silence the Gospel invitation.

The preacher does not tell sinners:

Do not come unless you can first prove that God has regenerated you.

He proclaims Christ.

The sinner is commanded to believe.

The theological question concerns why anyone responds savingly to that proclamation.

Luther's answer is grace.

Responsibility Remains

Nor does spiritual inability remove responsibility.

Paul's description in Romans 3 is accusatory.

He is establishing guilt.

He does not describe mankind as unfortunate victims who sincerely desire righteousness but are prevented from attaining it.

Their actions proceed from their own corruption.

Paul describes:

deceit;

cursing;

bitterness;

violence;

and concludes:

"There is no fear of God before their eyes."

— Romans 3:18

The guilt is genuine because the rebellion is genuine.

Why Men Do Not Believe

The Gospel of John also describes unbelief morally.

Christ says:

"And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light."

— John 3:19

Why?

"because their deeds were evil."

Notice the language of love.

Men:

"loved darkness."

Their problem is not merely insufficient information.

They possess sinful affections.

This again supports Luther's understanding of bondage as a bondage involving the desires of the heart.

Grace Must Change What Man Loves

If man's problem includes what he loves, salvation must reach the affections.

Grace must do more than place correct information before the mind.

God must change the heart.

This is why the biblical promise of the new covenant is so important:

> *"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."*
>
> — Ezekiel 36:26

And:

> *"I will put my spirit within you."*
>
> — Ezekiel 36:27

The change comes from God and results in a new manner of life.

Regeneration Before Spiritual Fruit

The theological principle can therefore be expressed simply:

Life produces the activities of life; the activities do not create the life from which they proceed.

A living tree bears fruit.

Fruit does not first appear on a dead tree and thereby cause the tree to become alive.

Likewise, Luther's doctrine places God's quickening work logically prior to the spiritual acts that flow from renewed life.

The sinner believes.

The sinner repents.

The sinner comes.

But he does so because grace has acted, not in order to cause grace to act.

Where Luther's Argument Is Strong

Luther is on particularly strong biblical ground when he insists that Erasmus must account for the universal language of passages such as Romans 3.

A doctrine which assigns fallen man an independent spiritual ability to seek God must explain:

"There is none that seeketh after God."

It must explain:

"they that are in the flesh cannot please God."

It must explain:

"No man can come to me, except the Father... draw him."

And it must explain why spiritually dead sinners are said to be quickened by God.

These are not peripheral texts.

They describe man's condition directly.

Where Care Is Still Needed

Nevertheless, we should continue to distinguish Luther's central biblical argument from every conclusion he may draw from it.

The fact that man cannot regenerate himself does not by itself answer every question concerning the relationship between regeneration, the preached Word, faith, repentance and the operations of the Holy Ghost.

Nor does the language of spiritual death permit us to treat human beings as morally inactive objects.

Scripture continues to command, warn and hold them responsible.

We must preserve the full testimony.

Erasmus's Difficulty

Erasmus wanted to retain some power by which fallen man could apply himself towards salvation.

Luther's challenge can now be stated very sharply:

Where is this power described in Scripture?

Romans says none seeks God.

Ephesians says man is dead in sins.

Romans 8 says the carnal mind cannot submit to God.

John says no man can come unless drawn by the Father.

If Erasmus's free choice survives these statements, Luther insists that its nature must be demonstrated rather than assumed.

Grace Does Not Find Seekers; It Creates Them

This leads to one of the most important consequences of Luther's doctrine.

Grace does not merely search the world for naturally produced seekers and then reward them for beginning the journey.

Grace creates the very response it requires.

God makes alive.

God draws.

God calls.

God grants the new heart.

Then the sinner willingly comes.

This is why Luther believed salvation excludes boasting at its very beginning.

The believer cannot finally say:

I was naturally wiser than another man because I sought God while he did not.

Paul has already said:

"There is none that seeketh after God."

If the believer now seeks God, something has happened to him.

Grace has intervened.

The Question of Faith Itself

We have now reached the next stage of Luther's argument.

Erasmus could concede that grace is necessary and still ask whether man must contribute the act of believing.

Surely Scripture repeatedly says:

Believe.

Does not faith therefore arise from the human will?

Luther's answer requires us to examine the origin of faith itself.

Is faith a naturally available human contribution which God rewards?

Or is saving faith itself the fruit of God's gracious work through His Word and Spirit?

Paul writes:

"For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ... to believe on him."

— Philippians 1:29

The language is striking:

"it is given... to believe."

That brings us to the next major question in the controversy.

CHAPTER 20

Is Faith the Gift of God?

We have now reached an important point in Luther's argument.

Erasmus could acknowledge that grace is necessary and still preserve a decisive place for the human will by arguing that God provides grace, presents Christ and offers salvation, but the final act of believing belongs to man.

On such a view, grace makes salvation possible.

The human will determines whether that possibility becomes an actuality.

Luther believed this still left too much in man's hands.

The question therefore becomes:

Where does saving faith itself come from?

Is faith the one contribution fallen man must produce from his own natural resources?

Or does Scripture present faith itself as arising from the gracious operation of God?

This question is crucial because if faith itself is ultimately produced independently by fallen man's free will, then the decisive difference between the believer and unbeliever remains in man.

But if faith is given by God, then salvation is gracious from beginning to end.

"By Grace Are Ye Saved Through Faith"

One of the best-known statements concerning salvation occurs in Ephesians:

> *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:*
>
> *Not of works, lest any man should boast."*
>
> — Ephesians 2:8–9

Three things immediately appear.

Salvation is:

by grace;

through faith;

and:

not of works.

Paul's purpose is to exclude boasting.

Whatever precise grammatical relationship we understand between the expression "the gift of God" and the preceding words, Paul's overall argument is unmistakable.

Salvation does not originate:

"of yourselves."

It is:

"the gift of God."

Does Ephesians 2:8 Specifically Call Faith the Gift?

Here we should be precise.

Ephesians 2:8 is frequently quoted as though Paul simply said:

Faith is the gift of God.

The actual sentence is:

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God."

There has been considerable discussion concerning exactly what the word "that" refers to.

It is therefore wiser not to make the entire doctrine depend upon a disputed grammatical point.

Paul's broader statement is clear: the salvation described as by grace through faith is not from ourselves but is God's gift.

Other passages can then be considered when asking specifically about the origin of faith.

This approach allows Scripture to establish the doctrine cumulatively rather than forcing one verse to carry more than its wording necessarily requires.

"It Is Given... to Believe"

Philippians provides a much more explicit statement:

"For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake."

— Philippians 1:29

The language is striking.

Paul says:

"it is given... to believe on him."

Believing is therefore spoken of as something given.

This does not mean the believer does not actually believe.

God does not believe instead of him.

The person believes.

But the capacity and disposition by which he believes are not presented as an autonomous achievement originating independently of grace.

Faith is genuinely man's act, yet its saving exercise is graciously given.

The Believer Really Believes

This distinction is important.

If we say faith is God's gift, we must not imagine that the sinner becomes passive in the sense that someone else performs the act of believing on his behalf.

Scripture says:

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

— Acts 16:31

The sinner must believe.

Likewise:

"Whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

— John 3:15

The believer is the one believing.

Divine grace does not eliminate human action.

It accounts for the spiritual change from which that action proceeds.

This is the same distinction we encountered when considering ***the bondage of the will***.

Grace does not destroy the will.

It renews it.

Lydia's Heart

The conversion of Lydia provides a particularly clear example.

Luke writes:

"And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city

of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us."

— Acts 16:14

Paul preached.

Lydia heard.

But Luke then adds something significant:

"whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul."

Notice the relationship.

Paul speaks.

Lydia hears.

The Lord opens her heart.

Lydia attends to the message.

This provides a useful biblical picture of divine grace operating through the preached Word.

The Lord Opened Her Heart

Luke could simply have written:

Lydia listened carefully and believed.

Instead, he draws attention to God's action:

"whose heart the Lord opened."

This is precisely the kind of statement that supports Luther's argument.

The decisive spiritual opening is attributed to the Lord.

Yet Lydia is not treated as a machine.

She hears.

She attends.

She responds.

Divine action and human response therefore appear together.

The Lord's action explains rather than eliminates Lydia's believing response.

The Word Remains Necessary

Lydia's conversion also guards against another misunderstanding.

If faith is God's gift, does preaching become unnecessary?

The passage shows the opposite.

God opens Lydia's heart as Paul speaks.

The Word is the appointed means.

Paul writes:

"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

— Romans 10:17

This is important for understanding Luther.

His doctrine of sovereign grace did not lead him to disregard preaching.

The God who gives faith uses His Word.

"As Many as Were Ordained"

Another important passage occurs during Paul's preaching at Antioch in Pisidia.

Luke writes:

"And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord."

— Acts 13:48

Then:

"and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed."

The order of the statement deserves attention.

Luke does not say:

As many as believed were then ordained to eternal life.

He says:

"as many as were ordained to eternal life believed."

For Luther's understanding of grace, this is highly significant.

The believing response does not appear as an independent event which subsequently causes God's saving purpose.

God's purpose precedes the believing response.

Not Everyone Believed

The passage also confronts us with the very question underlying the controversy.

The Gospel is preached.

Some believe.

Others do not.

What explains the difference?

If the final answer is an autonomous power of free will possessed equally by both groups, then the decisive distinction lies in the

people themselves.

But Luke deliberately directs attention towards divine appointment:

"as many as were ordained to eternal life believed."

Luther's theology places the explanation ultimately in grace.

Granted Repentance

The same principle appears in relation to repentance.

After Peter reports the conversion of Cornelius and his household, the believers in Jerusalem respond:

"Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life."

— Acts 11:18

Repentance is something sinners actually do.

They repent.

Yet Scripture can also describe repentance as something God grants.

Paul similarly instructs Timothy concerning those who oppose the truth:

"If God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth."

— 2 Timothy 2:25

Again, repentance is attributed to God's giving.

Faith and Repentance

Faith and repentance therefore display the same pattern.

Man believes.

Yet believing is given.

Man repents.

Yet repentance is granted.

There is no contradiction if God's grace is understood as producing a willing human response.

The contradiction arises only if divine action and human action are assumed to be mutually exclusive.

Luther rejects that assumption.

God can work in man so that man genuinely wills and acts.

Paul has already said:

"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

— Philippians 2:13

"What Hast Thou That Thou Didst Not Receive?"

Paul asks the Corinthians:

"For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?"

— 1 Corinthians 4:7

The immediate context concerns boasting and divisions within the Corinthian church, and we should respect that context.

Nevertheless, the principle is relevant.

Whatever spiritual good the Christian possesses is received.

Paul asks:

"what hast thou that thou didst not receive?"

If saving faith were the one decisive spiritual good which originated entirely from the believer himself, the question would become difficult to answer.

Luther's doctrine gives a consistent answer.

Faith too belongs to grace.

Why One Believes and Another Does Not

Suppose two sinners hear the same Gospel.

Both are fallen.

Both are commanded to believe.

One believes and the other rejects Christ.

What makes them differ?

One answer says:

Both received identical grace, but one used his free will more wisely.

The ultimate difference therefore lies in man's decision.

Luther's answer is different.

The believer cannot trace his faith back to some superior spiritual quality naturally possessed within himself.

He must say with Paul:

"By the grace of God I am what I am."

— 1 Corinthians 15:10

Grace accounts for the difference.

Does This Make God Believe for Us?

No.

This objection arises because we naturally imagine that if God causes something, the human action cannot also be genuine.

But Scripture does not reason that way.

Consider again Philippians:

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

— Philippians 2:12

That is genuine human activity.

Then immediately:

"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

— Philippians 2:13

God's working does not cancel man's working.

It explains how spiritually good willing and doing occur.

Grace Is More Than an Opportunity

This reveals one of the deepest differences between Luther and Erasmus.

Grace cannot merely mean that God places an opportunity for salvation before fallen man.

If everyone receives an identical opportunity and the decisive spiritual movement comes from man's independent will, then grace itself does not finally explain salvation.

It makes salvation possible.

Man makes it actual.

Luther believed biblical grace is stronger than this.

God not only provides Christ.

He brings sinners to Christ.

The Shepherd Finds the Sheep

Christ's parable of the lost sheep provides an appropriate picture.

The shepherd:

"goeth after that which is lost, until he find it."

— Luke 15:4

The emphasis falls upon the shepherd's action.

The sheep is lost.

The shepherd seeks.

The shepherd finds.

The shepherd brings it home rejoicing.

We should not force every detail of a parable into a theological system, but the image is consistent with the broader biblical pattern.

Salvation originates in the saving action of God.

The Son of Man Came to Seek

Christ states the principle explicitly:

"For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."

— Luke 19:10

The Gospel is therefore not fundamentally the story of lost sinners successfully finding their own way back to God.

It is the story of God acting in Christ to save the lost.

This does not remove faith.

It explains why faith has an object and why salvation is possible at all.

Drawn to Christ

We return once more to John 6:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

— John 6:44

The man who is drawn comes.

The coming is real.

The drawing is God's.

Christ also says:

"All that the Father giveth me shall come to me."

— John 6:37

The certainty is remarkable.

Those given by the Father:

"shall come."

The Father's gift does not prevent their coming.

It ensures it.

Effectual Calling

Later Reformed theology commonly described this divine work as effectual calling.

The expression distinguishes the outward proclamation of the Gospel from God's inward work by which sinners are brought to faith.

The Gospel may be preached to many who reject it.

But when God savingly calls, He brings the sinner willingly to Christ.

Paul's language in Romans 8 is relevant:

> *"Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified."*
>
> — Romans 8:30

The calling in this sequence results in justification.

It therefore appears to be more than the outward invitation alone, since not everyone who outwardly hears the Gospel is justified.

Faith Comes Through the Word

Yet the effectual character of God's work must not detach faith from Scripture.

Paul asks:

> *"How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?"*
>
> — Romans 10:14

Then:

> *"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."*
>
> — Romans 10:17

God ordinarily brings people to faith through the proclamation of Christ.

This keeps sovereign grace and evangelism together.

The preacher proclaims.

The hearer hears.

God works.

The sinner believes.

The Holy Ghost and Faith

The Holy Ghost therefore occupies an essential place in conversion.

Paul writes:

"No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost."

— 1 Corinthians 12:3

Again, this refers to genuine confession rather than merely pronouncing words.

Saving recognition of Christ is not a product of unaided human nature.

The Spirit opens the heart to receive the Word.

This is why the Gospel is more than intellectual persuasion.

Born of God

John's Gospel gives perhaps an even more fundamental description.

Speaking of those who receive Christ, John writes:

"Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

— John 1:13

The language is particularly relevant to ***The Bondage of the Will***.

The new birth is:

"not... of the will of man."

It is:

"of God."

Luther could hardly have asked for language more directly opposed to the idea that regeneration ultimately originates in man's autonomous willing.

Birth Is Received, Not Produced

The metaphor of birth reinforces the point.

A person does not cause his own natural birth.

Life is received.

Likewise, spiritual birth originates in God.

Christ tells Nicodemus:

"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

— John 3:3

The sinner's need is therefore deeper than moral encouragement.

He needs life.

The Wind Bloweth Where It Listeth

Christ continues:

> *"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."*
>
> — John 3:8

The new birth is the work of the Spirit.

Man does not control the Spirit.

This again supports Luther's insistence that salvation cannot ultimately be placed under the sovereignty of man's independent will.

The Spirit gives life.

Does Faith Come Before Regeneration?

At this point later theological debates often ask:

Which comes first—regeneration or faith?

The question can be useful, but we should be careful not to demand from Luther or from individual biblical passages a technical sequence more precise than the text itself provides.

Scripture clearly teaches that men must believe.

It also teaches that the natural man cannot produce saving faith apart from God's work.

It describes the new birth as God's action.

It describes faith and repentance as given.

Therefore, at minimum, God's gracious operation must account for the sinner's believing response.

We need not make every passage answer a later scholastic question in exactly the same terminology.

Faith Is Not Merit

Calling faith a gift also protects us from another error.

Faith must not be turned into a work by which the sinner earns salvation.

Faith does not possess merit because it is such an impressive human achievement.

Its value lies in its object:

Christ.

An empty hand does not purchase the gift it receives.

Likewise, faith receives Christ and His righteousness.

The believer therefore cannot boast in the quality of his believing.

His boast is in the Lord.

"Where Is Boasting Then?"

Paul asks:

"Where is boasting then? It is excluded."

— Romans 3:27

This provides an important test for any doctrine of salvation.

Does the doctrine leave the believer with some independent spiritual achievement by which he can distinguish himself from another sinner?

Luther wanted the answer to be no.

If faith itself is the fruit of grace, boasting is excluded at the very point where the sinner receives Christ.

The Believer's Testimony

The Christian therefore does not say:

Christ did most of the work, and I supplied the decisive part that made His work effective for me.

He says:

I was lost, and God had mercy upon me.

He believed because he was brought to believe.

He came because the Father drew him.

He repented because repentance was granted.

He lives because God made him alive.

Yet none of this means that his believing, coming and repenting were unreal.

They were genuinely his acts.

Grace made them possible and actual.

Luther's Central Concern

We can now see why Luther resisted even the smallest independent contribution of free will in salvation.

The question was not how much credit should be assigned to man and how much to God.

Luther rejected the division itself.

Salvation is not a cooperative enterprise in which God performs ninety-nine parts and autonomous man supplies the final one.

The whole saving movement originates in grace.

The sinner's response is real, but it is itself the fruit of God's gracious work.

This is what Luther believed Erasmus failed to understand.

A Necessary Caution

Nevertheless, we should again avoid going beyond Scripture.

To say that faith is graciously given does not authorise us to treat the Gospel invitation as insincere.

Nor does it justify telling unbelievers that they should wait passively for some identifiable experience of regeneration before believing.

Scripture commands:

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

— Acts 16:31

The sinner's duty is to believe the Gospel.

The preacher's duty is to proclaim it.

The secret operation of God is God's concern.

Our responsibility lies with what He has revealed.

Faith Looks Outward

This is pastorally important.

A troubled sinner should not be directed inward to ask:

Have I received enough grace to believe?

He should be directed to Christ.

The Gospel does not say:

Discover whether you are regenerate and then come to Christ.

Christ says:

"Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."

— John 6:37

The proper object of faith is not faith itself.

It is Christ.

From Faith to Grace Alone

The argument has now advanced considerably.

Fallen man does not naturally seek God.

He is spiritually dead.

He cannot come to Christ unless drawn by the Father.

God opens the heart.

God grants repentance.

Believing is spoken of as given.

The new birth is:

"not... of the will of man, but of God."

Luther therefore believes that Erasmus's remaining power of free choice has been progressively removed.

But another question follows.

If God must act first, does man at least cooperate with grace once grace begins its work?

Can salvation be understood as God taking the first step and man completing what God has begun?

Or must grace itself be understood as effective from beginning to end?

This takes us to an expression that became central to Reformation theology:

grace alone.

CHAPTER 21

Grace Alone — Does Man Cooperate in His Conversion?

We have now reached one of the central questions in the disagreement between Luther and Erasmus.

Both men could speak of grace.

Both could affirm that man needs divine assistance.

Both could deny that salvation is achieved entirely by human effort.

The disagreement therefore cannot be reduced to:

Luther believed in grace; Erasmus did not.

The real question was more precise:

> **What does grace actually accomplish, and what part, if any, does fallen man's independent will contribute to his conversion?**

Does God begin the work and then wait for man to complete it?

Does grace merely restore enough freedom for the sinner to make the decisive choice?

Or does God graciously produce the very willing and believing by which the sinner comes to Christ?

For Luther, this question determined whether salvation was truly of grace.

What Do We Mean by Grace Alone?

The expression grace alone, later commonly represented by the Latin sola gratia, means that salvation originates entirely in the undeserved favour and saving action of God.

It does not mean that man never believes, repents, obeys or acts.

He does all of these things.

The question is what accounts for them.

Luther's position may be expressed simply:

The sinner does not produce the beginning of his own conversion. God's grace acts upon him so that he willingly repents and believes.

Grace therefore does not merely offer salvation.

It saves.

Grace Is Undeserved

Paul writes:

> *"And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace."*
>
> — Romans 11:6

Paul establishes a fundamental distinction.

Grace and meritorious works cannot be combined as two independent grounds of salvation.

If something is given because the recipient has earned it, it is no longer grace in the same sense.

Paul makes the same point elsewhere:

> *"Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt."*
>
> — Romans 4:4

A wage is owed.

Grace is given.

The sinner cannot therefore place God in his debt.

Erasmus's Moderate Proposal

Erasmus did not claim that fallen man could accomplish salvation

without God.

His position was deliberately moderate.

Grace must act.

But Erasmus wanted to preserve some genuine contribution from the human will.

This might be described as cooperation with grace.

God provides grace.

Man responds.

Together the divine and human actions result in conversion.

At first sight this may appear to preserve both sides of the biblical testimony.

God acts.

Man acts.

But Luther believed the formulation concealed the very question under dispute.

Where Does the Cooperation Come From?

Luther's question is:

What causes the sinner to cooperate rather than resist?

Suppose two fallen sinners hear the same Gospel.

Both receive whatever general assistance Erasmus attributes to grace.

One cooperates.

The other refuses.

What explains the difference?

If the answer is:

The first man independently used his free will better than the second,

then the decisive difference lies in man.

The believer possesses something for which grace itself does not finally account.

Luther regarded this as incompatible with Paul's exclusion of boasting.

"Who Maketh Thee to Differ?"

Paul asks:

"For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou

that thou didst not receive?"

— 1 Corinthians 4:7

Again, the immediate context concerns boasting among the Corinthians, but the principle is important.

The Christian's spiritual blessings are received.

If one sinner believes while another remains in unbelief, the believer cannot ultimately explain the difference by pointing to an independently generated spiritual superiority within himself.

He must trace his salvation to grace.

"By the Grace of God I Am What I Am"

Paul's own testimony is especially appropriate:

"But by the grace of God I am what I am."

— 1 Corinthians 15:10

Paul does not say:

Grace made salvation available, but I made myself what I am by cooperating better than others.

He says:

"By the grace of God I am what I am."

Yet the same verse immediately introduces Paul's own activity:

"and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all."

Paul worked.
Paul laboured.
Paul acted.
But then he adds:

"yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."

Here divine grace and genuine human activity appear together.

Grace Does Not Eliminate Activity

This verse helps prevent a serious misunderstanding of Luther.

If grace alone means that Christians become entirely inactive, Paul's statement would make little sense.

He says:

"I laboured more abundantly than they all."

Grace did not make Paul passive.

It produced extraordinary activity.

But Paul refuses to make that activity independent of grace:

"yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."

The more accurately we understand grace, therefore, the less reason we have to contrast it with genuine Christian action.

Conversion and the Christian Life

At this point an important distinction should be made between:

the sinner's conversion

and:

the subsequent Christian life.

Luther's strongest denial of cooperation concerns the sinner's transition from spiritual death to spiritual life.

A dead sinner does not cooperate in producing his own regeneration.

God makes alive.

But once made alive, the believer genuinely acts.

He prays.

He obeys.

He resists temptation.

He serves his neighbour.

He grows in knowledge.

He pursues holiness.

All of this remains dependent upon grace, but the regenerate believer is not inactive.

"Work Out Your Own Salvation"

Paul therefore commands Christians:

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

— Philippians 2:12

Taken alone, this might appear to place the entire burden upon human effort.

But the next verse explains why such Christian activity is possible:

"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

— Philippians 2:13

The believer works because God works in him.

And God's work reaches even to the will:

"both to will and to do."

This is one of the clearest biblical expressions of the relationship Luther was trying to defend.

God Works the Will

If God merely supplied external assistance while leaving the decisive spiritual willing entirely independent, Paul's language would be surprising.

Instead, God works:

"to will."

The will itself therefore comes under grace.

This does not mean God destroys the will.

He renews it.

The believer then genuinely desires what grace has enabled him to desire.

The result is not unwilling obedience produced by external force.

It is a changed heart producing changed willing.

The New Covenant Promise

This is precisely what God promised through Ezekiel:

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."

— Ezekiel 36:26

Then:

"And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes."

— Ezekiel 36:27

Notice again the divine initiative:

I will give.

I will put.

I will cause.

Yet the result is that God's people themselves:

"walk in my statutes."

God's action produces human obedience.
It does not replace it.

Regeneration

The theological term commonly used for this divine giving of spiritual life is regeneration.

Christ speaks of being:

"born again."

— John 3:3

Paul speaks of God's:

"quickening"

those who were dead in sins.

Titus speaks of:

"the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost."

— Titus 3:5

In each case salvation requires an action deeper than external moral improvement.

The sinner needs new life.

"Not by Works of Righteousness"

The context in Titus is particularly clear:

"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us."

— Titus 3:5

The contrast is between:
our works
and:
His mercy.

Paul then attributes regeneration to:

"the renewing of the Holy Ghost."

The sinner does not regenerate himself.
God saves.

Can the Dead Cooperate in Being Made Alive?

This is where Luther's argument becomes particularly sharp.

Paul describes fallen sinners as:

"dead in trespasses and sins."

— Ephesians 2:1

Then:

"even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ."

— Ephesians 2:5

Who performs the quickening?

God.

The dead person does not first make himself partly alive so that God may complete the process.

The metaphor places the source of life outside the sinner.

God gives life.

The Lazarus Illustration

Later theologians have sometimes illustrated regeneration by the raising of Lazarus.

Lazarus lay dead in the tomb.

Christ called:

"Lazarus, come forth."

— John 11:43

And Lazarus came forth.

The illustration can be useful if handled cautiously.

Lazarus did not contribute to the act which restored his physical life.

Christ gave life.

But once alive, Lazarus genuinely came forth.

Likewise, divine grace does not eliminate human response.

It creates the spiritual life from which the response proceeds.

We should nevertheless remember that John 11 itself concerns a physical resurrection, so the illustration should not be made to prove more than other passages explicitly teach concerning regeneration.

Monergism

Later theology used the term monergism to describe the position Luther was defending.

The word comes from terms meaning one working.

In conversion or regeneration, God is the effective source of the

saving work.

The opposite position is often called synergism, meaning working together.

These technical terms can be useful, but they can also create misunderstanding.

Monergism does not mean that man never acts.

It means that God's regenerating grace is not produced by cooperation between an unregenerate sinner and God.

Once renewed, the believer genuinely responds.

Does Man Resist Grace?

Scripture certainly speaks of resisting God.

Stephen tells his hearers:

"Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost."

— Acts 7:51

This must be taken seriously.

People resist God's Word.

They reject the Gospel.

They oppose His messengers.

The doctrine of grace must therefore not be formulated as though Scripture never speaks of resistance.

The more precise question is:

Can man's resistance finally defeat God's purpose when God determines savingly to bring that sinner to Christ?

Luther's answer is no.

Saul of Tarsus

The conversion of Saul provides a striking example.

Saul was not seeking Christ as Saviour.

He was persecuting Christians.

Luke says:

"Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord."

— Acts 9:1

Yet Christ intervened.

Saul's conversion was not the culmination of a gradual exercise of autonomous free will towards Christ.

Christ confronted him.

The persecutor became an apostle.

Paul later describes his conversion in terms of mercy:

"But I obtained mercy."

— 1 Timothy 1:13

Grace did not merely reward Paul's wise decision.

Grace overtook a persecutor.

"It Pleased God"

Paul describes his calling in Galatians:

"But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace,

To reveal his Son in me..."

— Galatians 1:15–16

Again the initiative belongs to God.

It pleased God.

God called.

God revealed His Son.

Paul certainly believed and obeyed, but his own account traces the beginning of the saving movement to God's gracious purpose.

The Damascus Road Is Exceptional—but the Principle Remains

We should not assume that every conversion must resemble Paul's dramatic experience.

Most Christians do not see a heavenly light or hear an audible voice.

Paul's apostolic calling was exceptional.

But the theological principle remains relevant.

The sinner's salvation originates in God's mercy rather than in a naturally superior inclination towards Christ.

The manner varies.

The source remains grace.

The Gospel Call and the Inward Work

It is useful again to distinguish between the outward call of the Gospel and God's inward saving work.

The outward message can be resisted.

People heard Christ Himself and rejected Him.

People heard the apostles and rejected them.

Yet when God opens the heart, as with Lydia, the hearer receives the Word.

Thus:

"whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul."

— Acts 16:14

The Lord's opening accounts for Lydia's response.

Does This Make the Gospel preaching Meaningless?

No.

God's sovereignty does not make the Gospel unnecessary because the Gospel is one of the means God uses to bring sinners to faith.

Paul says:

"it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe."

— 1 Corinthians 1:21

And:

"faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

— Romans 10:17

Therefore the doctrine of grace should encourage rather than discourage preaching.

The preacher does not possess the power to regenerate anyone.

But God does.

Why Luther Rejects the Small Contribution

We can now understand why Luther was unwilling to grant Erasmus even a very small independent contribution from free will.

Suppose we say:

God performs 99 per cent of salvation, but man supplies the final 1 per cent independently.

That one per cent becomes decisive.

Without it, salvation does not occur.

The final distinction between believer and unbeliever therefore lies in something man supplies independently of grace.

For Luther, this compromises the very meaning of grace.

The issue is not the size of man's contribution.
It is its independence.

Grace and Boasting

Paul repeatedly excludes boasting.

"Where is boasting then? It is excluded."

— Romans 3:27
And:

"For by grace are ye saved through faith... Not of works, lest any man should boast."

— Ephesians 2:8–9

Luther wants a doctrine of salvation in which the believer has no independent spiritual achievement upon which to boast.

Everything returns to God's mercy.

"What Do You Have That You Did Not Receive?"

The question therefore remains:

"What hast thou that thou didst not receive?"

— 1 Corinthians 4:7
Faith?
Received.
Repentance?
Granted.
A new heart?
Given.
Spiritual life?
Quickened by God.
The Holy Ghost?
Given.
Christ?
Given.

The believer therefore has nothing upon which to establish spiritual superiority over another sinner.

His response is gratitude.

Does Grace Alone Make Man a Puppet?

This objection should now be easier to answer.

A puppet has no mind, desires or will of its own.

A converted sinner does.

Grace does not transform a human being into an object.

It transforms his heart.

The believer then willingly comes to Christ.

Christ says:

"Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power."

— Psalm 110:3

Whatever questions may surround the precise application of this verse, the combination of power and willingness expresses the principle well.

Divine power does not need to destroy willingness.

It can produce it.

Freedom Through Grace

This also reveals something important about the meaning of true freedom.

Erasmus feared that Luther's doctrine destroyed human freedom.

Luther believed grace actually creates the only freedom that matters spiritually.

The sinner enslaved to sin is not truly free towards God.

Christ says:

"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

— John 8:36

Freedom is therefore not independence from God.

It is liberation by God from the dominion of sin.

Cooperation After Conversion

Once regenerated, the Christian genuinely participates in the life of obedience.

Paul can exhort believers:

"Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth."

— Colossians 3:5

He can say:

"Let us run with patience the race that is set before us."

— Hebrews 12:1

The Christian is not told to remain passive.
But even here dependence upon God continues.
Christ says:

"Without me ye can do nothing."

— John 15:5

Grace is not merely the doorway into Christianity.
The Christian continues by grace.

Grace and Sanctification

This distinction also helps us separate justification, regeneration and sanctification without dividing them.

In justification, God declares the believer righteous in Christ.
In regeneration, God gives spiritual life.
In sanctification, the renewed believer increasingly walks in holiness through the operation of the Spirit.

Good works therefore belong properly to the Christian life.
But none of them becomes the ground upon which God justifies the sinner.
The order remains important.

Luther's Great Concern

Behind Luther's fierce language stands a simple concern:
God must receive all the glory for salvation.
If man is spiritually dead, God makes alive.
If man cannot come, the Father draws.
If the heart is closed, the Lord opens it.
If repentance is needed, God grants it.
If faith is exercised, Scripture can speak of believing as given.

The sinner truly repents and believes, but he cannot trace those acts to an autonomous spiritual power existing independently of grace.

He must say:

"By the grace of God I am what I am."

A Necessary Qualification

Yet we should again distinguish Luther's theological conclusions from Scripture itself.

The biblical passages strongly support the priority and necessity

of divine grace.

But later technical terms such as monergism, particular formulations concerning the exact logical order of regeneration and faith, and detailed systems explaining precisely how divine and human action relate are theological constructions.

They may be useful and well founded.

But they must remain subordinate to Scripture.

Our final authority is not a theological label.

It is the Word of God.

Grace Alone and the Gospel

Properly understood, grace alone should not drive the sinner away from Christ.

It should direct him towards Christ.

The Gospel does not tell the sinner to produce some preliminary spiritual qualification before coming.

Christ says:

> *"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*
>
> — Matthew 11:28

And:

> *"Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."*
>
> — John 6:37

The sinner is therefore commanded and encouraged to come.

The doctrine of grace explains why anyone does.

The Controversy Reaches Its Deepest Point

We can now see why Luther believed Erasmus had touched the central issue of the Reformation.

The question of free will leads directly to the question of grace.

If fallen man contributes the decisive independent movement towards God, salvation finally depends upon the sinner's will.

If God graciously renews the will and brings the sinner to Christ, salvation depends upon God's mercy.

Paul's words stand at the centre of Luther's case:

> *"So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy."*

— Romans 9:16

But this raises perhaps the most difficult objection of all.

If salvation depends upon God's mercy rather than man's independent willing, why does God not show the same saving mercy to everyone?

Why are some saved and others not?

And if God's purpose cannot be frustrated, how can Scripture sincerely command all men to repent?

At this point Luther returns to the distinction we encountered earlier between God as He has revealed Himself in His Word and those secret purposes which He has not revealed.

That distinction is necessary—but it is also one of the most controversial parts of ***The Bondage of the Will.***

CHAPTER 22

The Revealed God and the Hidden God

We have now reached one of the most difficult and controversial parts of The Bondage of the Will.

Luther has argued that fallen man's will is spiritually bound, that faith and repentance depend upon divine grace, and that salvation ultimately rests upon:

"God that sheweth mercy."

— Romans 9:16

But this immediately raises a difficult question.

If God alone can bring the sinner to Christ, and if His saving grace is effective, why are not all men saved?

Scripture commands all men to repent.

The Gospel is to be preached to every creature.

God calls sinners to turn from their wickedness.

Yet not all repent and believe.

How are these truths to be reconciled with the sovereignty of God?

In answering this question Luther introduces a distinction between God as He has revealed Himself and God considered according to His secret or hidden majesty.

The distinction contains an important biblical principle.

But Luther's language can also become difficult and, at certain points, dangerous if it is pressed beyond what Scripture itself reveals.

We therefore need to examine it carefully.

The Question Erasmus Raises

Erasmus could appeal to passages which appear to express God's desire that sinners turn and live.

One of the clearest is found in Ezekiel:

"Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?"

— Ezekiel 18:23

Later God declares:

"For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the

Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye."

— Ezekiel 18:32

And again:

"As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live."

— Ezekiel 33:11

These are strong statements.

God calls the wicked to turn.

He declares that He has no pleasure in their death.

How, then, can Luther simultaneously maintain that man's conversion depends upon God's sovereign grace?

Luther's Distinction

Luther responds by distinguishing between God as preached and revealed in His Word and God considered in His hidden majesty.

God as revealed addresses sinners through His Word.

He commands repentance.

He promises mercy.

He presents Christ.

He calls sinners to believe.

This revealed Word is what men are commanded to hear.

But Luther argues that God's eternal counsel extends beyond what He has chosen to reveal to us.

There are divine purposes that belong to God alone.

We are not permitted to penetrate them.

This is what Luther is attempting to describe when he speaks of the hidden God.

The Biblical Foundation

The basic distinction is not unique to Luther.

Scripture itself distinguishes between what God reveals and what He keeps secret.

Moses writes:

"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever."

— Deuteronomy 29:29

This is perhaps the safest biblical foundation for the distinction.

There are:
secret things
and:
revealed things.
The secret things belong to God.
The revealed things belong to us.
That establishes an important boundary for theology.
We Are Responsible for What Is Revealed
The Christian's responsibility is not to discover God's secret decree.
It is to respond to what God has revealed.
If God says:

"Repent ye, and believe the gospel,"

— Mark 1:15
the sinner's responsibility is to repent and believe.
He is not entitled to reply:
I shall first discover whether I am among the elect.
Likewise, when Christ says:

"Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out,"

— John 6:37
the sinner has a revealed promise.
He is not instructed to look behind Christ for some secret message contradicting the promise.

Christ Is the Revelation of God

This point becomes even more important when we remember that God has revealed Himself supremely in His Son.
John writes:

"No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son... he hath declared him."

— John 1:18
Christ says:

"He that hath seen me hath seen the Father."

— John 14:9
Therefore Christian theology must begin with the God who has

made Himself known in Christ.

We are not called to construct another God behind Christ.

The Father who sends the Son is the God revealed in the Gospel.

The Danger of Looking Behind Christ

This provides an important pastoral safeguard.

A troubled sinner may reason:

Christ promises to receive those who come to Him, but perhaps God's secret will is that He will not receive me.

That reasoning should be rejected.

The revealed promise is:

"Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."

There is no qualification:

unless you happen to discover that you were secretly excluded.

The sinner is commanded to believe God's revealed Word.

Speculation concerning the hidden counsel of God must never be allowed to overturn Christ's explicit promise.

God's Secret Counsel

Nevertheless, Scripture clearly teaches that God possesses purposes not disclosed to us.

Paul exclaims:

> *"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"*
>
> — Romans 11:33

Then:

> *"For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?"*
>
> — Romans 11:34

There are limits to human knowledge of God.

The creature cannot comprehend the Creator exhaustively.

This is not a defect in Scripture.

It is a limitation inherent in being a creature.

Revealed Truly, Not Exhaustively

God has revealed Himself truly, but not exhaustively.

We can genuinely know what He has told us.

But we cannot know everything God knows about Himself and His purposes.

This distinction is important.

If we say God is entirely unknowable, revelation becomes meaningless.

If we say God is completely comprehensible to the human mind, we reduce the infinite Creator to the dimensions of the creature.

Scripture permits neither conclusion.

Luther's Legitimate Concern

At his strongest, Luther is making a very important point.

Erasmus cannot overturn clear biblical teaching concerning grace simply by asking questions about matters God has not explained.

For example:

Why does God bring one sinner to faith and not another?

The Christian may be unable to provide a complete answer.

But the existence of an unanswered question does not permit us to deny what Scripture does reveal.

Scripture still says:

> *"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."*
>
> — John 6:44

Mystery does not cancel revelation.

Where Luther Becomes Difficult

The difficulty arises when Luther appears to speak of the hidden God in a way that might suggest a conflict between God's revealed Word and His secret will.

If this distinction is handled carelessly, we might imagine two different Gods:

the revealed God who calls sinners to salvation

and:

a hidden God who secretly wills the opposite.

That would be a serious mistake.

There is only one God.

The God revealed in Christ is not a misleading appearance

concealing a fundamentally different deity behind Him.

Whatever mysteries belong to God's secret counsel, they cannot contradict His revealed character.

God Cannot Deny Himself

Paul writes:

"He cannot deny himself."

— 2 Timothy 2:13

God is consistent with His own nature.

He does not lie.

He does not deceive.

He is holy.

Therefore His secret purposes cannot make His revealed promises false.

When God promises salvation to those who believe in Christ, the promise is true.

When He commands sinners to repent, the command is genuine.

The existence of an unrevealed divine purpose does not make revelation dishonest.

God's Call to the Wicked

We should therefore allow Ezekiel's words to stand in their full force:

"Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?"

— Ezekiel 33:11

The call is genuine.

We should not explain it away.

The passage reveals God's righteous disposition towards repentance rather than wickedness.

God does not delight in evil for its own sake.

He commands men to turn from it.

God's Preceptive Will

Later theologians sometimes distinguished between God's preceptive will and His decretive will.

The terminology is later than Scripture itself, but the distinction can be useful.

God's preceptive will refers to what He commands creatures to do.

For example:

"Thou shalt not kill."

God's decretive will refers to His sovereign purpose concerning what will actually occur in history.

The crucifixion provides a striking example of why some distinction is necessary.

The Crucifixion Again

God's command forbids murder.

Yet Peter says Christ was:

"delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God."

— Acts 2:23

And those who crucified Him acted:

"by wicked hands."

Later the church prays concerning Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and Israel:

"For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done."

— Acts 4:28

The crucifixion therefore occurred according to God's determined purpose.

Yet the men who performed it violated God's moral will and were guilty.

This demonstrates that some distinction between God's command and His providential purpose is unavoidable.

One Event, Different Intentions

As with Joseph's brothers, the same historical event can contain different intentions.

Joseph says:

"Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good."

— Genesis 50:20

The brothers' purpose was evil.

God's purpose was good.

The event was one.

The intentions were not morally identical.

Likewise, God's sovereign purpose does not transform human wickedness into righteousness.

Nor does man's wickedness make God's purpose evil.

What We Must Not Conclude

The distinction between revealed and secret things must never become an excuse for saying:

God tells us one thing while secretly believing the opposite.

Nor should we say:

God's revealed character is merely a mask.

Such conclusions would undermine revelation itself.

If God cannot be trusted as He reveals Himself, faith becomes impossible.

The hidden counsel of God must therefore be understood in a way consistent with everything He has revealed concerning His holiness, truth and righteousness.

God's Character Is Not Hidden from Us

There are mysteries concerning God's purposes.

But His moral character is not left entirely unknown.

Scripture declares:

"God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."

— 1 John 1:5

Abraham asks:

"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

— Genesis 18:25

The answer is assumed.

God will do right.

Therefore, when we cannot explain His providence, the proper response is not to imagine unrighteousness in God.

It is to recognise the limits of our understanding.

The Potter and the Clay

Luther naturally returns to Paul's language:

"Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?"

— Romans 9:20

And:

"Hath not the potter power over the clay?"

— Romans 9:21

These words remind us of the Creator-creature distinction.

There will be questions to which God has not given us a complete answer.

Faith does not require exhaustive comprehension before trusting God.

But Paul's rebuke must not be turned into permission for theologians to invent answers and then silence objections by appealing to mystery.

The distinction is important.

Mystery Is Not a Blank Cheque

We may say:

Scripture teaches this, although I cannot fully explain how it relates to that.

We should not say:

Scripture is silent here, but I know God's hidden purpose anyway.

The first is submission to revelation.

The second is speculation.

This is precisely where Deuteronomy 29:29 protects us.

"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God."

They belong to Him.

Not to Luther.

Not to Erasmus.

Not to any later theological system.

Should We Ask Why God Does Not Save Everyone?

The question is understandable.

Scripture itself raises difficult questions concerning election and mercy.

But there comes a point at which the biblical answer is simply that salvation depends upon God's mercy and that God has not revealed every reason for His particular providential dealings.

Paul writes:

"Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy."

— Romans 9:18

The Christian may wish to know more.

But Scripture does not promise that every mystery of election will be explained to us in this life.

What We Do Know

We do know certain things.

God is righteous.

Man is sinful.

No sinner deserves salvation.

Christ genuinely receives everyone who comes to Him.

The Gospel is to be preached.

Sinners are commanded to repent and believe.

Those who believe owe their salvation to grace.

God does not owe salvation to anyone as a debt.

These truths provide boundaries within which the mystery must remain.

We should not sacrifice one of them in order to make another easier to understand.

"Whosoever Will"

Scripture speaks openly:

"And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

— Revelation 22:17

Nothing in the doctrine of election should be used to weaken this proclamation.

The Gospel does not say:

Whosoever can first discover the secret decree may come.

It says:

"whosoever will."

Luther's doctrine of bondage addresses why fallen men do not naturally will to come and why grace is necessary to change the heart.

It does not authorise us to place barriers before those who come to Christ.

The Door Is Christ

Christ says:

"I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved."

— John 10:9

The sinner therefore does not need access to God's secret counsel.

He needs Christ.

This is perhaps the safest pastoral use of Luther's distinction.

Do not attempt to climb into heaven and read the secret decree of God.

Look to Christ as He is revealed in the Gospel.

Assurance Must Rest on Christ

The same principle applies to Christian assurance.

If a believer continually attempts to discover his election by looking into God's hidden counsel, he may become trapped in endless introspection.

The Gospel directs him elsewhere.

Christ says:

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:

And I give unto them eternal life."

— John 10:27–28

Assurance rests upon Christ's promise and faithfulness.

The secret counsel of God is not an alternative Gospel.

Luther's Pastoral Strength

At his best, Luther understood this profoundly.

The terrified conscience should not attempt to reason its way into the hidden majesty of God.

It should flee to Christ.

God has chosen to make Himself known to sinners through His Word and His Son.

That is where faith must remain.

The Gospel gives Christ, not an invitation to speculate about eternity.

Luther's Theological Danger

Yet Luther's language concerning the hidden God , according to some, sometimes becomes stronger than we should comfortably follow.

When he speaks as though God considered in His hidden majesty may will something different from God as preached, we must insist upon biblical boundaries.

A distinction within our understanding of God's will must never become a division within God Himself.

Nor should statements concerning God's secret counsel be treated as though they were themselves revealed simply because a theologian has inferred them.

Here Luther, like every teacher, must remain under Scripture.

A Better Formulation

We may therefore express the biblical distinction more cautiously:

> **God has revealed everything necessary for us to know concerning salvation and has commanded us to respond to that revelation. He also possesses eternal purposes which He has not fully disclosed. Those secret purposes never contradict His holy character or make His revealed promises untrue. We must therefore believe what He has revealed and refuse to speculate beyond it.**

This preserves the strength of Luther's insight without requiring us to adopt every expression he uses.

The Gospel Remains Public

The practical conclusion is important.

Whatever belongs to God's secret counsel, the Gospel remains a public proclamation.

Christ commanded:

> *"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."*
>
> — Mark 16:15

The apostles did not first attempt to identify the elect.

They preached Christ.

Those who heard were commanded to repent and believe.

The doctrine of sovereign grace belongs alongside that proclamation, not in opposition to it.

The Secret Things Stay with God

This brings us back to the safest boundary:

> *"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us."*
>
> — Deuteronomy 29:29

There is profound wisdom in refusing to cross that boundary.

Where God has spoken, we should speak.

Where God has promised, we should believe.

Where God has commanded, we should obey.

Where God has remained silent, we should resist the temptation to manufacture certainty.

That principle applies not only to Erasmus.

It applies to Luther.

And it applies to us.

Luther's Argument Is Nearly Complete

We have now followed Luther through the principal theological arguments of The Bondage of the Will.

Man is fallen.

His will is enslaved to sin.

Divine commands do not prove natural spiritual ability.

God's foreknowledge and sovereignty cannot be reduced to passive observation.

Pharaoh's hardening demonstrates the reality of divine government alongside human responsibility.

No fallen man naturally seeks God.

Faith and repentance arise through grace.

Conversion therefore cannot ultimately be explained by an autonomous human contribution.

And God's secret purposes must not be confused with the Word He has revealed and commanded us to believe.

But one final question remains.

What did Luther believe he had actually proved against Erasmus?

Did he mean that man has no meaningful freedom whatsoever?

Did he deny human responsibility?

Or was his conclusion narrower: that free will is powerless in those things which concern salvation until man is renewed by grace?

To answer that, we need to bring Luther's argument together and examine his final verdict on Erasmus's Diatribe.

CHAPTER 23

Luther's Verdict on Free Will

We have now followed the principal argument of The Bondage of the Will.

Luther has challenged Erasmus's understanding of Scripture, examined the meaning of divine commands, appealed to God's foreknowledge and sovereignty, considered Pharaoh and the hardening of the heart, described fallen man's bondage to sin, and argued that faith, repentance and conversion depend upon the gracious operation of God.

We are therefore in a position to ask:

What exactly does Luther believe he has proved?

This question matters because the statement:

"Luther denied free will"

can easily misrepresent him.

Luther did not deny that human beings possess wills.

He did not deny that they make choices.

He did not deny that they act voluntarily.

Nor did he deny that people exercise considerable freedom in the ordinary affairs of this life.

His argument was directed towards something much more specific.

Does fallen man possess a free spiritual power by which he can turn himself towards God and contribute independently to his own salvation?

To that question Luther's answer is emphatically:

No.

The Sphere of Human Freedom

Luther was willing to speak of human freedom in what might be called earthly or civil matters.

People make real decisions.

A man may choose where to live.

He may buy or sell property.

He may learn a trade.

He may marry.

He may govern.

He may perform acts of generosity.

He may make countless moral and practical decisions.

Luther's doctrine does not require us to deny any of this.

The controversy with Erasmus concerns man's relationship to

God.

The issue is not whether a sinner can choose between two meals.

It is whether fallen man can, by his natural spiritual power, turn himself from sin to God.

A Will Is Not Necessarily a Free Will

This distinction is fundamental.

To possess a will is not necessarily to possess a will free from every determining inclination.

We choose according to what we desire.

And our desires arise from what we are.

Christ says:

"A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit."

— Matthew 7:18

The tree acts according to its nature.

Likewise, Luther argues that the fallen will operates according to the condition of fallen man.

The sinner genuinely wills.

But he does not possess a spiritually neutral nature from which he may independently choose either sin or God.

Fallen Man Is Not Neutral

Paul's language has repeatedly supported this conclusion.

"The carnal mind is enmity against God."

— Romans 8:7

And:

"So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God."

— Romans 8:8

Likewise:

"There is none that seeketh after God."

— Romans 3:11

And Christ says:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

— John 6:44

Taken together, these passages present something much stronger than a merely weakened spiritual ability.

They describe alienation, hostility and inability.

This is the biblical foundation upon which Luther's verdict rests.

Erasmus's Free Will Becomes Very Small

One of the striking features of the controversy is that Erasmus himself had defined free will modestly.

He was not defending the idea that man could save himself without grace.

His definition attempted to preserve only a limited human power by which man could apply himself towards salvation or turn away from it.

But Luther believed that even this small remaining ability could not survive the biblical testimony.

If fallen man naturally possesses the power to move himself towards saving grace, Luther asks:

Why does Scripture say none seeks God?

Why does Christ say no man can come unless drawn?

Why does Paul say God works in us:

"both to will and to do"?

Why must the heart be opened?

Why must the dead be quickened?

The smaller Erasmus makes free will, the more Luther asks what purpose the term still serves.

Luther's Attack on the Name "Free Will"

Luther therefore objects not only to the doctrine but also to the expression itself.

If the human will cannot turn itself towards God without grace, calling it free in spiritual matters may create a false impression.

The term suggests a power which Luther believes fallen man does not possess.

He would therefore rather reserve genuine spiritual freedom for the freedom God gives through Christ.

Christ says:

"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

— John 8:36

True spiritual freedom is therefore the result of liberation.

It is not fallen man's natural possession.

Bondage Is Not Compulsion

We must again preserve one of the most important distinctions in Luther's argument.

Bondage does not mean that the sinner is physically compelled to sin against his desires.

He sins willingly.

Christ says:

> *"Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."*
>
> — John 3:19

The word loved matters.

The sinner's problem lies not merely in an external chain.

It reaches his affections.

He prefers darkness.

Thus inability and responsibility can exist together.

The sinner cannot produce a holy heart from his fallen nature, yet his sinful actions remain genuinely his because they proceed from what he loves and desires.

Responsibility Does Not Require Autonomy

Erasmus feared that denying free will would undermine human responsibility.

The objection remains important.

If man cannot save himself, how can God command him to repent?

Luther's answer is that responsibility depends upon obligation, not autonomous ability.

God's righteous standard does not disappear because man has corrupted himself.

The command:

> *"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart"*
>
> — Matthew 22:37

reveals what man ought to do.

It does not prove that fallen man naturally possesses the spiritual

power to perform it perfectly.

The Law reveals both God's righteousness and man's failure.

The Law Exposes Bondage

This explains why divine commands do not establish free will.

Paul writes:

"For by the law is the knowledge of sin."

— Romans 3:20

The Law does not merely provide instructions for spiritually neutral people.

It exposes sinners.

It reveals what righteousness requires and thereby exposes man's inability and guilt.

The command does not necessarily say:

You possess the natural power to accomplish this.

It says:

This is what God requires.

Grace Does What the Law Cannot

The Gospel therefore does not merely repeat the command more loudly.

Grace supplies what fallen man lacks.

God promises:

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."

— Ezekiel 36:26

Then:

"And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes."

— Ezekiel 36:27

The movement is from divine action to human obedience.

God gives.

God puts His Spirit within.

God causes His people to walk.

Then they genuinely walk.

This is the freedom produced by grace.

Luther's Positive Doctrine

It would therefore be a mistake to read The Bondage of the Will merely as a negative book.

Its ultimate subject is not bondage.

It is grace.

Luther destroys confidence in free will because he wants confidence placed elsewhere.

Not:

in man's ability to choose God,

but:

in God's ability to save man.

The doctrine of bondage is therefore intended to prepare the way for the doctrine of divine mercy.

Salvation Does Not Depend upon the Strength of Man's Will

This had enormous pastoral importance for Luther.

If salvation ultimately depends upon the sinner's ability to produce the decisive spiritual movement towards God, assurance must eventually turn inward.

The believer asks:

Was my decision sincere enough?

Was my faith strong enough?

Did I cooperate sufficiently with grace?

Luther wants the troubled conscience directed away from itself.

Salvation rests upon Christ.

The Certainty Luther Seeks

This explains why Luther connects the bondage of the will with Christian assurance.

If salvation ultimately rests upon the unstable human will, how secure can it be?

Human beings change.

Their emotions fluctuate.

Their resolutions weaken.

Their faith may sometimes feel exceedingly small.

But God's purpose does not fluctuate with human emotions.

Christ says concerning His sheep:

"And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, nei-

ther shall any man pluck them out of my hand."

— John 10:28

The believer's hope rests ultimately upon the faithfulness of Christ.

Grace Does Not Make Faith Unnecessary

Yet Luther's doctrine must not be interpreted as though faith were unnecessary.

Scripture repeatedly says:

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

— Acts 16:31

Faith is necessary.

The question is not whether man believes.

He does.

The question is why he believes.

Luther's answer is that grace has brought him to faith.

Thus the believer can simultaneously say:

I believed in Christ

and:

God had mercy upon me and brought me to believe.

There is no contradiction.

Nor Does Grace Make Repentance Unnecessary

The same applies to repentance.

Peter commands:

"Repent ye therefore, and be converted."

— Acts 3:19

Yet Scripture also speaks of God granting repentance:

"Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life."

— Acts 11:18

Man repents.

God grants repentance.

The biblical writers do not appear troubled by placing these truths together.

Neither should we artificially separate them.

The Will Renewed by Grace

Luther's doctrine therefore does not end with an enslaved will.

Grace renews the will.

The sinner who once resisted God comes willingly to Christ.

The man who once loved darkness begins to love the light.

The man who once had no spiritual appetite begins to hunger and thirst after righteousness.

The will remains genuinely human.

But it is no longer the same will in the same spiritual condition.

God has acted upon the heart.

"Thy People Shall Be Willing"

The words of the Psalm provide an appropriate description:

"Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power."

— Psalm 110:3

Power and willingness are not opposites.

God's power does not need to crush man's will in order to save him.

It can make the unwilling willing.

This is very different from external compulsion.

Grace conquers by changing the heart.

Luther's Verdict on Erasmus

Luther therefore concludes that Erasmus's conception of free will cannot be maintained.

If by free will Erasmus means an independent spiritual ability in fallen man by which he may apply himself towards salvation, Luther believes Scripture denies it.

Man possesses a will.

But in relation to salvation that will is bound until grace liberates it.

The sinner does not begin the saving movement.

God does.

This is Luther's central verdict.

Where Luther Is Biblically Strong

Having followed the argument carefully, we can identify several places where Luther's case is particularly strong.

Scripture plainly teaches that fallen man is enslaved to sin.

Christ says:

"Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin."

— John 8:34

Scripture teaches spiritual inability:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

— John 6:44

Scripture says:

"There is none that seeketh after God."

— Romans 3:11

It teaches that God makes spiritually dead sinners alive:

"Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ."

— Ephesians 2:5

And it teaches that God works:

"both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

— Philippians 2:13

Luther is therefore standing upon substantial biblical ground when he denies man's autonomous spiritual ability.

Where Luther Needs Qualification

But agreement with Luther's central argument does not require us to defend every expression he uses.

His polemical style sometimes pushes theological formulations beyond the language Scripture itself employs.

The illustration of the human will as a beast ridden either by God or Satan can be useful for denying spiritual neutrality, but it becomes misleading if taken to imply that human beings are merely passive instruments without genuine desires and responsibility.

Likewise, his language concerning God's hidden majesty must not be interpreted as though there were one God revealed in Christ and another contradictory God behind Him.

There is one God.

His secret purposes may exceed our understanding.

They do not make His revealed Word false.

Luther Must Remain Under Scripture

This principle is particularly important in a companion volume such as this.

Luther was a great Reformation theologian.

He recovered and defended truths of enormous importance.

But Luther is not our final authority.

Nor did Luther himself claim to be.

The proper question is never simply:

What did Luther say?

It is:

Does what Luther says agree with the Word of God?

Where he faithfully expounds Scripture, we should receive the truth he teaches.

Where his language requires qualification, we should qualify it.

Where he goes beyond what God has revealed, we should stop where Scripture stops.

Erasmus Must Also Remain Under Scripture

The same standard applies to Erasmus.

His moderation and concern about excessive dogmatism contain a legitimate warning.

Christians should not claim certainty where God has not spoken.

Erasmus was also right to resist any formulation that would make God morally evil or man an innocent victim of divine compulsion.

But moderation cannot become a reason for weakening clear biblical statements.

If Scripture teaches human inability, we cannot preserve a doctrine of free will merely because it appears philosophically more comfortable.

The question remains:

What has God revealed?

Luther's Great Achievement

Luther's greatest achievement in The Bondage of the Will may therefore be his refusal to allow the doctrine of salvation to rest finally upon man.

He presses the question relentlessly:

Who saves?

If God merely offers salvation while fallen man's autonomous will provides the decisive movement, Luther believes grace has been diminished.

But if God seeks the lost, makes the dead alive, opens the heart, grants repentance, gives faith and brings the sinner to Christ, then salvation can truly be confessed as:

"of the LORD."

— Jonah 2:9

The Glory Belongs to God

Paul writes:

"For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."

— Romans 11:36

That is ultimately where Luther wants his argument to end.

Not with man congratulating himself upon the superior exercise of his will.

But with the redeemed sinner giving glory to God.

The Christian looks back upon his conversion and does not say: I made myself to differ.

He says:

"By the grace of God I am what I am."

— 1 Corinthians 15:10

What, Then, of Free Will?

We may now formulate Luther's conclusion carefully.

If by free will we mean that human beings possess wills, make genuine choices and exercise meaningful freedom in ordinary earthly affairs, Luther does not need to deny it.

If by free will we mean that fallen man acts voluntarily and is morally responsible for his actions, Luther does not need to deny that either.

But if by free will we mean:

an independent spiritual power remaining in fallen man by which he can turn himself towards God, produce saving faith, or make the decisive contribution to his regeneration,

then Luther's answer is:

Such a free will does not exist.

Man must be made free.

And:

"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

— John 8:36

The Debate Was About the Gospel

We can now understand why Luther regarded Erasmus as having addressed the right subject.

The controversy was not an abstract philosophical debate about whether human beings make choices.

It concerned the Gospel.

Is the sinner's salvation ultimately secured by God's gracious action, or does its decisive cause remain in fallen man's independent will?

Luther believed the answer determined whether grace remained grace.

That is why The Bondage of the Will remains important five hundred years later.

Its language belongs to a sixteenth-century controversy.

Its central question does not.

If I am saved, who receives the glory?

Luther's answer is unmistakable.

God alone.

PART FOUR

From Luther to the Protestant Confessions

Luther's controversy with Erasmus did not end with the publication of The Bondage of the Will in 1525.

The questions raised in that controversy continued throughout the Reformation and became embedded in the confessions of faith produced by the churches that emerged from it.

What is the condition of man's will after the Fall?

Can fallen man prepare himself for conversion?

Does grace merely assist the human will, or must God first renew

it?

What place do faith and repentance have in conversion?

How can divine sovereignty and human responsibility both be maintained?

These were no longer merely questions debated between two scholars. They became matters upon which churches were required to state their doctrine publicly and precisely.

This development is particularly important for understanding Luther.

The forceful and sometimes deliberately provocative language of The Bondage of the Will was written in controversy. Confessions of faith, however, required more measured definitions. They had to state positively what the churches believed rather than merely answer an opponent.

By following the doctrine from Luther into the Protestant confessions, we can therefore see which elements of his argument became established features of Reformation theology and where later theologians expressed those doctrines with greater precision.

Our examination will eventually bring us to the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, where the doctrines of the Fall, free will, effectual calling, justification and the decree of God are brought together in a form of particular importance to Particular Baptists.

But before following that development, one question must first be answered.

Did Luther himself continue to hold the position he defended so vigorously in 1525?

CHAPTER 24

Luther's Teaching After 1525

It would be easy to imagine The Bondage of the Will as the product of one particularly heated controversy.

Luther was responding directly to Erasmus. His language was forceful. At times it was deliberately provocative. We might therefore ask whether the doctrines expressed in the book represented Luther's settled theology or merely the extreme language of controversy.

The question is important.

If Luther subsequently abandoned his position, The Bondage

of the Will would have to be understood differently. It might represent an important stage in his theological development without necessarily expressing his mature convictions.

But Luther did not treat the work in that way.

Luther's Own Estimate of the Book

Years after the controversy with Erasmus, Luther looked back over his writings and expressed dissatisfaction with many of them.

That is hardly surprising.

He had written an enormous quantity of material during rapidly changing circumstances. Some works had been produced hastily. Others addressed controversies that had long since passed.

Yet The Bondage of the Will occupied a distinctive place in his own assessment of his writings.

In 1537, when Luther wrote to Wolfgang Capito concerning a proposed collection of his works, he indicated that he would willingly allow much of what he had written to disappear. Among the writings he regarded more favourably, however, he singled out his Catechism and The Bondage of the Will.

That is significant.

Twelve years had passed since the controversy with Erasmus.

Luther had not come to regard the book as an unfortunate youthful excess.

He still considered it one of his important works.

Why Luther Valued It

The reason becomes clear when we remember what Luther had said to Erasmus.

Others, he believed, had attacked comparatively secondary matters.

Erasmus had addressed the central issue.

The question was not simply whether men possess wills.

Nor was it whether human beings make ordinary choices.

The issue concerned man's ability before God.

Can fallen man make himself spiritually acceptable to God?

Can he initiate his conversion?

Can he produce the faith by which he receives Christ?

Or must salvation begin with God's gracious action?

Luther regarded these questions as inseparable from the Gospel

itself.

The Reformation Was Not Merely About Indulgences

This helps correct a common misunderstanding of the Reformation.

It is sometimes presented primarily as a dispute concerning indulgences or abuses within the medieval Church.

The controversy over indulgences was certainly important historically.

But Luther's theology soon reached much deeper questions.

What is righteousness?

How is a sinner justified?

What has sin done to human nature?

What can the Law accomplish?

What is grace?

What is faith?

Who brings the sinner to Christ?

These questions cannot be separated from the controversy concerning the will.

Justification and the Bound Will

Luther's doctrine of justification and his doctrine of the bound will therefore belong together.

If fallen man cannot establish righteousness before God, righteousness must be found elsewhere.

Paul writes:

> *"But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested."*
>
> — Romans 3:21

And:

> *"Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe."*
>
> — Romans 3:22

The sinner does not construct the righteousness by which he is justified.

He receives righteousness in Christ.

This corresponds naturally with Luther's rejection of confidence in human spiritual ability.

The Direction Is Away from Man

Both doctrines move in the same direction.

The bondage of the will says:

Do not look within fallen man for the power that begins salvation.

Justification by faith says:

Do not look within fallen man for the righteousness upon which salvation rests.

Both direct the sinner away from himself.

The answer is found in Christ.

Law and Gospel

This also helps explain the importance Luther placed upon the distinction between Law and Gospel.

The Law reveals what God requires.

It commands righteousness.

It exposes sin.

But the Law cannot create the righteousness it demands within fallen man merely by commanding him.

Paul writes:

"For by the law is the knowledge of sin."

— Romans 3:20

The Gospel announces what God has accomplished in Christ.

Thus the Law says:

This is what you ought to be.

The Gospel announces:

This is what God has done for sinners in Christ.

The distinction fits naturally with Luther's rejection of the argument that commands prove spiritual ability.

The Command Does Not Supply the Power

This was one of the principal issues in the debate with Erasmus.

God commands:

Repent.

Believe.

Love God.

Obey.

But Luther insisted that the existence of the command does not establish fallen man's natural ability to fulfil it.

The command reveals duty.

Grace supplies what sinful man lacks.

This conviction did not disappear after 1525.

It became part of Luther's wider understanding of Law and Gospel.

Luther's Catechisms

The importance Luther later attached to his catechetical writings is also significant.

His Small Catechism and Large Catechism, both published in 1529, were intended to teach Christian doctrine plainly rather than conduct an academic controversy.

Their tone is therefore very different from The Bondage of the Will.

Yet the underlying dependence upon divine grace remains.

Christian faith is not presented as confidence in man's natural religious capacity.

It rests upon God's Word, God's promise and God's saving action in Christ.

The Holy Ghost and Faith

This is particularly evident in Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism.

There Luther explains that man cannot, by his own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him, but that the Holy Ghost calls through the Gospel, enlightens, sanctifies and keeps the believer in the true faith.

This is remarkably important for our study.

The statement appears four years after The Bondage of the Will.

And it expresses in simple catechetical language essentially the same central conviction Luther had defended against Erasmus.

Man does not come to Christ by his own natural power.

The Holy Ghost must act.

From Controversy to Catechism

The difference is therefore principally one of presentation.

In 1525 Luther argues fiercely against Erasmus.

In 1529 he teaches ordinary Christians.

The polemical language has largely disappeared.

The doctrine remains.

This helps us distinguish Luther's essential position from some of the more extreme illustrations used in the controversy.

The central doctrine can survive without the rhetoric.

"I Cannot by My Own Reason or Strength"

This statement from Luther's catechetical teaching deserves particular attention.

It concerns precisely the question Erasmus and Luther had debated.

Can man's natural powers bring him to saving faith?

Luther's answer remains:

No.

Neither human reason nor natural strength can produce saving faith in Christ.

The Holy Ghost must call through the Gospel.

This also demonstrates something we have repeatedly emphasised.

Luther's doctrine of grace does not make the Word unnecessary.

The Spirit works through the Gospel.

Word and Spirit

This protects Luther's theology from the idea that conversion is merely an unexplained inward experience.

God has appointed means.

The Gospel is proclaimed.

The Holy Ghost works through that proclamation.

The sinner hears.

The Spirit enlightens.

The sinner believes.

Paul writes:

"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

— Romans 10:17

Word and Spirit therefore belong together.

Luther Did Not Abandon the Bound Will

We can consequently answer our original question.

There is no good reason to treat The Bondage of the Will as a doctrine Luther later discarded.

His later catechetical teaching continues to deny that fallen man's own reason or strength can produce saving faith.

His continued high regard for the 1525 work confirms its importance to him.

The doctrine remained part of his theology.

But Luther's Language Became More Pastoral

What does change is the manner in which the doctrine is expressed.

This is instructive.

Controversial writings often state doctrines in their sharpest form because they are answering an opponent.

Catechisms and confessions must do something different.

They must teach positively.

They must distinguish carefully.

They must provide language suitable for the continuing instruction of the Church.

This is one reason the confessional development following Luther is so useful.

From Luther to Lutheranism

Luther was not the Lutheran Church.

After him came theologians who had to state the doctrines of the Reformation systematically and confessionally.

Disputes arose even among those who regarded themselves as Luther's heirs.

Questions concerning original sin, free will, conversion and grace therefore had to be defined with increasing precision.

The result was the development of the Lutheran Confessions.

Here we can ask a particularly revealing question:

> **When Lutheran churches formally confessed their doctrine of free will and conversion, did they preserve Luther's central argument against Erasmus?**

The answer will show us whether The Bondage of the Will remained merely Luther's personal position or became part of the doctrinal inheritance of the Lutheran Reformation.

That is where we should go next.

The Lutheran Confessions and the Human Will

Luther's personal conviction concerning the bondage of the will is important, but the Reformation did not depend upon the writings of one man alone.

As Lutheran churches became established, they required public statements of faith capable of expressing their doctrine clearly and defending it against misunderstanding. These confessional documents enable us to ask an important historical question:

> **Did the Lutheran churches preserve Luther's teaching concerning the inability of the fallen will, or did they move towards the more moderate position defended by Erasmus?**

The answer is significant.

The Lutheran Confessions continued to reject the idea that fallen man possesses a natural spiritual power by which he can initiate his conversion to God.

At the same time, their language often became more precise than Luther's highly polemical expressions in The Bondage of the Will.

The Augsburg Confession

The Augsburg Confession of 1530 became the foundational confession of the Lutheran Reformation.

It was principally prepared by Philip Melanchthon and presented before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg.

Its purpose was not to reproduce every argument Luther had made against Erasmus.

It was to state publicly what the Lutheran churches believed.

Two of its articles are particularly relevant to our study:

Article II — Of Original Sin

and:

Article XVIII — Of Free Will.

Together they provide an important early confessional statement concerning fallen man and his ability.

Original Sin

Article II teaches that since Adam's fall, men are born with a corrupted nature and without the fear of God and true faith in Him.

The importance of this doctrine should already be apparent.

The problem is not merely that men imitate Adam's bad example.

Something has happened to human nature itself.

The Fall has consequences for Adam's descendants.

This agrees with the foundation of Luther's argument.

The controversy concerning free will cannot be understood apart from the doctrine of original sin.

Why Original Sin Matters

If fallen man remained spiritually as Adam was originally created, then the argument concerning free will would be very different.

Adam was created upright.

But fallen man is not Adam before the Fall.

Paul writes:

> *"Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin."*
>
> — Romans 5:12

And:

> *"By one man's disobedience many were made sinners."*
>
> — Romans 5:19

The doctrine of the will must therefore begin with the condition of the person whose will is being discussed.

This is precisely why later confessions commonly treat the Fall before treating free will.

Article XVIII — Of Free Will

Article XVIII of the Augsburg Confession is particularly important because it makes a distinction very similar to the one we have already found in Luther.

Human beings possess a certain freedom concerning civil righteousness and ordinary outward matters.

They can make decisions within the affairs of this life.

But without the Holy Ghost they cannot produce the righteousness of God or the spiritual movements necessary for salvation.

This distinction is crucial.

The Lutheran Confession does not simply say:

Man has no will.

Nor does it say:

Every human action is externally compelled.

Instead it distinguishes between man's ability in earthly matters and his inability in spiritual matters.

Civil Righteousness

A fallen person may therefore perform outwardly good actions.

He may care for his family.

He may obey civil law.

He may conduct business honestly.

He may assist the poor.

He may exercise discipline and courage.

He may even participate outwardly in religious practices.

None of this requires us to deny the doctrine of the bound will.

The question is whether such natural and civil abilities amount to the power to produce saving faith and spiritual righteousness before God.

The Augsburg Confession says they do not.

Spiritual Righteousness Is Different

This distinction prevents two opposite errors.

The first would say that because fallen man cannot convert himself, he cannot do anything whatsoever.

That is clearly false.

The second would reason that because fallen man can perform ordinary moral actions, he must therefore possess the natural ability to turn himself savingly towards God.

The Lutheran confession rejects that inference.

Civil ability does not prove spiritual ability.

This is substantially the same distinction Luther had made against Erasmus.

The Holy Ghost Is Necessary

The decisive difference lies in the necessity of the Holy Ghost.

Paul writes:

"No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost."

— 1 Corinthians 12:3

And Christ says:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

— John 6:44

Thus the Augsburg Confession preserves the central principle of The Bondage of the Will:

Fallen man cannot produce saving faith from his own natural powers.

Grace is necessary.

Melanchthon and Luther

It is worth noticing that the Augsburg Confession was principally drafted by Melanchthon rather than Luther.

This makes its agreement with Luther particularly significant.

We are no longer dealing merely with Luther's personal rhetoric in controversy with Erasmus.

The doctrine is being expressed confessionally on behalf of the Lutheran churches.

The language is more measured.

The essential conclusion remains.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, written primarily by Melanchthon in defence of the Augsburg Confession, develops these matters further.

The term Apology here means a defence, not an expression of regret.

The Apology particularly emphasises the inability of human reason and natural powers to produce the fear of God, trust in God and saving faith.

Again the distinction between outward morality and spiritual righteousness becomes important.

Human beings may exercise a form of civil righteousness.

But the heart cannot produce true faith in God by natural powers alone.

The Heart of the Question

We therefore return repeatedly to the same distinction.

The controversy is not fundamentally:

Can an unbeliever perform an outwardly good act?

The question is:

Can fallen man, without the gracious work of the Holy Ghost,

produce that faith by which he truly receives Christ?

Luther said no.

The Augsburg Confession said no.

The Apology maintained the same fundamental position.

The Lutheran Reformation therefore did not abandon Luther's central argument.

Later Controversies

However, the death of Luther in 1546 did not end theological controversy within Lutheranism.

Disagreements arose concerning several doctrines, including the nature of original sin, the relationship between grace and the human will, and the manner in which conversion occurs.

This eventually led to the production of one of the most important documents for our particular subject:

The Formula of Concord.

Published in 1577, more than fifty years after The Bondage of the Will, it addressed disputes that had arisen among Lutherans themselves.

Its treatment of free will provides an especially useful test of Luther's continuing influence.

The Formula of Concord

The Formula of Concord addresses the doctrine directly in its article concerning Free Will, or Human Powers.

By this stage the terminology is considerably more systematic.

The question is not whether fallen man possesses reason or a will in ordinary affairs.

The question concerns:

conversion, faith and salvation.

The Formula rejects the idea that unregenerate man can, by his own powers, begin or contribute towards his conversion.

This is remarkably close to the central argument Luther had made against Erasmus in 1525.

Not Merely Weak

The Formula's understanding of fallen man is stronger than saying that the sinner is spiritually weak and merely requires

additional assistance.

Scripture describes him as:

"dead in trespasses and sins."

— Ephesians 2:1

The language of death matters.

The sinner requires more than encouragement.

He requires spiritual life.

The Formula therefore places conversion under the gracious work of God through the Holy Ghost.

The Word and the Holy Ghost

But here an important qualification appears.

The Lutheran Confessions do not present conversion as though God ordinarily operates independently of His appointed means.

The Holy Ghost works through the Word.

This reflects Paul's statement:

"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

— Romans 10:17

The Gospel is preached.

The sinner hears.

The Holy Ghost works through the Word.

Faith is produced.

Thus divine sovereignty does not make preaching unnecessary.

It establishes the need for preaching as God's appointed means.

Man Does Not Convert Himself

The Formula therefore rejects the idea that the sinner converts himself.

This is precisely the point Luther had pressed against Erasmus.

If man supplies the first spiritually good movement, then grace no longer explains the beginning of salvation.

But Scripture attributes the beginning to God.

Lydia heard Paul preach, but Luke tells us:

"whose heart the Lord opened."

— Acts 16:14

The Lord's action explains Lydia's response.

She truly hears and believes.

But God opens the heart.

Nor Is Man a Stone

At the same time, Lutheran theology had to avoid another misunderstanding.

If man cannot convert himself, is he merely an inanimate object?

Does conversion mean that God saves something with no intellect, will or consciousness?

Clearly not.

A human being is not literally a stone or block of wood.

The language of spiritual inability concerns man's relationship to God, not the destruction of his humanity.

God regenerates a human being.

The renewed person then genuinely believes, desires and acts.

Grace Creates Willingness

The principle we identified earlier therefore remains essential.

Grace does not merely drag an unwilling believer into salvation.

It changes the sinner so that he willingly believes.

Paul says:

"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

— Philippians 2:13

God works:

"to will."

The resulting willing is genuinely the believer's.

The divine operation does not abolish human willing.

It produces a new spiritual disposition.

Three Conditions of the Human Will

At this point it becomes useful to distinguish different conditions of mankind.

This distinction would become particularly clear in later Reformed confessions, but the underlying principle is already important.

We should not speak of the human will as though man's spiritual condition never changes.

There is:

man as originally created;
man after the Fall;
and:
man renewed by grace.
The will must be considered in relation to each condition.

Adam Before the Fall

Adam was created upright.
He was not created enslaved to sin.
God's creation was good.
Therefore the bondage of the will cannot be an essential feature of humanity as God originally made it.
Bondage belongs to fallen humanity.
This protects God from the suggestion that He created man morally corrupt.

Man After the Fall

After the Fall, the situation changes.
Sin affects the heart, mind and will.
Man remains a rational and responsible creature.
But spiritually he is alienated from God.
Paul says:

"The carnal mind is enmity against God."

— Romans 8:7
And:

"neither indeed can be"

subject to God's law.
The fallen will therefore remains active but is no longer spiritually upright.

Man Renewed by Grace

When God regenerates the sinner, the will is renewed.
The believer begins to desire God.
He believes.
He repents.
He obeys.
He can now say:

"I delight in the law of God after the inward man."

— Romans 7:22

This is not the natural condition of fallen man.

It is the fruit of grace.

Luther's Doctrine Becomes Confessional

We can therefore see an important development.

In 1525 Luther argues:

The fallen will is bound.

In the Augsburg Confession the Lutheran churches distinguish between civil ability and spiritual inability.

In the later Formula of Concord the doctrine of conversion is stated with still greater precision.

The language develops.

The central principle remains.

Fallen man does not initiate his own conversion.

Where the Confessions Improve upon Luther's Rhetoric

This is particularly helpful when considering some of Luther's more extreme expressions.

We do not need to repeat every metaphor from The Bondage of the Will in order to preserve its central doctrine.

The confessions demonstrate that the doctrine can be stated more carefully.

Man possesses a will.

He exercises ordinary choices.

He remains responsible.

He hears the Word.

He believes.

Yet the saving change by which he comes to Christ is attributed to God's grace through the Holy Ghost.

This is a more measured formulation than simply saying:

Man has no free will.

A Significant Difference Will Emerge

However, as we proceed from Lutheran to Reformed theology, an important distinction will emerge.

Both traditions strongly affirm man's inability and the necessity of divine grace.

But they do not always explain the relationship between God's

sovereign decree, election, grace and conversion in precisely the same way.

This becomes especially important when we reach the doctrine of predestination.

We should therefore avoid assuming that:

Lutheran

and:

Reformed

are simply interchangeable terms.

They are not.

Common Reformation Ground

Nevertheless, on the question immediately before us there is substantial common ground.

Historic Lutheran and Reformed theology both reject the idea that fallen man possesses an independent natural power capable of producing saving faith.

Both recognise the seriousness of original sin.

Both insist upon the necessity of divine grace.

Both deny that salvation can ultimately be attributed to human merit.

This common ground is part of Luther's theological legacy.

Luther and Erasmus Revisited

We can therefore return to the original controversy.

Had the Lutheran Confessions moved towards Erasmus's position, we might conclude that Luther's extreme argument in 1525 had been quietly corrected by his successors.

But that is not what happened.

The confessional Lutheran tradition continued to maintain that fallen man's natural powers cannot produce saving faith or initiate conversion.

In that central respect, the verdict of The Bondage of the Will remained.

From Lutheran to Reformed Confessions

The doctrine now moves beyond the churches directly associated with Luther.

The Swiss and wider Reformed Reformation developed alongside

the Lutheran movement.

Here figures such as Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger and John Calvin addressed many of the same questions concerning sin, grace, election and the human will.

The Reformed churches subsequently expressed these doctrines in their own confessions.

And it is within this tradition that we begin to see the theological line that will eventually lead through the English Reformation, Westminster theology and the Particular Baptists to the **Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.**

That development deserves careful examination.

CHAPTER 26

The Reformed Confessions and the Sovereignty of Grace

The Lutheran Reformation was not the only movement to emerge from the upheavals of the sixteenth century.

While Luther and his associates were labouring principally in Germany, reform was also developing in Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe. Figures such as Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, John Calvin, Martin Bucer and others addressed many of the same fundamental questions that had occupied Luther and Erasmus.

What is the condition of man after the Fall?

What can the human will accomplish in relation to salvation?

Why does one sinner believe while another remains in unbelief?

What is the relationship between election, grace, faith and conversion?

The Reformed churches answered these questions with a strong emphasis upon the sovereignty of God and the inability of fallen man to restore himself to fellowship with God.

There was therefore substantial agreement with Luther's central argument in The Bondage of the Will.

But we must be historically careful.

The Reformed doctrine of grace was not simply Lutheran theology copied by Calvin and others.

Both traditions drew upon Holy Scripture and upon the earlier Augustinian controversy concerning sin and grace. They developed alongside one another and sometimes differed significantly.

A Common Augustinian Inheritance

We have already seen that the controversy did not begin with Luther.

Centuries earlier Augustine had opposed Pelagius concerning the effects of Adam's Fall and the necessity of divine grace.

The Reformers inherited those questions.

They also inherited Paul's language:

"There is none righteous, no, not one."

— Romans 3:10

And:

"There is none that seeketh after God."

— Romans 3:11

And Christ's declaration:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

— John 6:44

The Reformed doctrine of human inability therefore claimed a biblical foundation rather than resting merely upon Luther's authority.

Zwingli and Divine Sovereignty

Ulrich Zwingli, the leading Reformer at Zürich, developed a particularly strong understanding of divine providence.

For Zwingli, God was not merely reacting to events taking place independently of Him.

God sovereignly governs His creation.

This naturally brought the Reformed discussion beyond the immediate question of man's will to the larger doctrine of divine providence.

Yet the same difficulty we encountered with Luther remained.

If God sovereignly governs history, how can human beings remain morally responsible?

The Reformed tradition would repeatedly return to this question.

Calvin and Luther

John Calvin was a generation younger than Luther.

His Institutes of the Christian Religion first appeared in 1536,

eleven years after The Bondage of the Will.

Calvin greatly respected Luther, although the two men were not identical in theology.

On the condition of fallen man's will, however, there was considerable agreement.

Calvin rejected the idea that fallen man retains an independent spiritual power by which he can turn himself towards God.

Like Luther, he believed the problem went deeper than ignorance.

Human nature itself had been corrupted by the Fall.

The Will Remains

Calvin did not argue that fallen man had ceased to possess a will.

This is the distinction we have repeatedly emphasised.

The sinner thinks.

He chooses.

He desires.

He acts.

He remains responsible.

But his will operates according to his fallen nature.

The problem is therefore not the absence of willing.

It is the corruption of the person who wills.

Christ says:

"A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit."

— Matthew 7:18

The nature of the tree determines the character of its fruit.

Necessity Is Not Compulsion

Here the Reformed tradition continued a distinction familiar from Augustine and Luther.

A man may act necessarily according to his nature without acting under external compulsion.

The sinner does not ordinarily sin because someone physically forces him to act against his desires.

He sins willingly.

This is why Christ can say:

"Men loved darkness rather than light."

— John 3:19

Their bondage involves what they love.

Thus inability does not remove responsibility.

The Reformed Confessions

As Reformed churches became established, they produced confessions and catechisms to state their doctrine publicly.

Among the important documents were the French Confession of 1559, the Scots Confession of 1560, the Belgic Confession of 1561, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, and later the Canons of Dort of 1618–1619.

These documents were written in different circumstances and should not be treated as though they were all saying precisely the same thing in precisely the same way.

Nevertheless, a recognisable doctrinal pattern emerges.

Man's Original Condition

The Reformed confessions commonly begin by affirming that God did not create man sinful.

Man was originally created good and upright.

This is essential.

The bondage of the fallen will must not be attributed to a defect in God's original creation.

Scripture says:

"So God created man in his own image."

— Genesis 1:27

And after considering His creation:

"God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good."

— Genesis 1:31

Man's corruption therefore enters through the Fall.

The Fall Changed Man's Condition

Adam's transgression was not regarded merely as an isolated act affecting Adam alone.

The Fall brought mankind into sin and death.

Paul writes:

"By one man's disobedience many were made sinners."

— Romans 5:19

The Reformed confessions therefore speak strongly about original sin and the corruption of human nature.

This becomes the necessary background to their doctrine of free will.

The question is not:

What could Adam do before the Fall?

It is:

What can fallen man now do towards his own spiritual restoration?

The Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession gives a particularly strong description of the consequences of Adam's Fall.

Man became corrupted in his whole nature and lost the excellence he had received from God.

The confession does not mean that every human faculty ceased to exist.

Reason remains.

The will remains.

Human beings continue to live within society.

But man's spiritual relationship to God has been radically affected.

This is why grace cannot merely be an optional assistance added to an otherwise spiritually healthy nature.

The Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism approaches the question pastorally.

It asks whether man is so corrupt that he is wholly incapable of doing good and inclined towards evil.

Its answer introduces an essential qualification:

this remains the condition of man unless he is regenerated by the Spirit of God.

That qualification is extremely important.

The doctrine is not:

Man is permanently incapable of spiritual good under every possible condition.

It is:

Fallen man cannot restore himself; regeneration is necessary.

Grace changes the condition being described.

Regeneration Changes the Will

This returns us to a central theme of our study.

The will is bound because man is fallen.

When God regenerates the sinner, He does not remove his humanity.

He renews him.

The biblical promise is:

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."

— Ezekiel 36:26

The solution to the corrupted heart is therefore a new heart.

And God says:

"I will put my spirit within you."

— Ezekiel 36:27

The initiative belongs to God.

Calvin and Regeneration

Calvin strongly emphasised the work of the Holy Ghost in bringing the sinner to faith.

External preaching alone cannot overcome the spiritual corruption of the heart.

The Word must be accompanied by the operation of the Spirit.

This does not diminish the importance of preaching.

It explains why preaching can become spiritually effective.

Paul may plant and Apollos may water:

"but God gave the increase."

— 1 Corinthians 3:6

The minister proclaims.

God gives life.

Election Becomes More Explicit

At this point the Reformed tradition tends to make the connection between conversion and election more explicit than the Lutheran confessional tradition generally did.

Paul writes:

"According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of

the world."

— Ephesians 1:4

And:

"Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself."

— Ephesians 1:5

The Reformed churches understood salvation as arising from God's eternal gracious purpose rather than from His foresight of some independent spiritual virtue in man.

Why Election Matters to the Question of Free Will

Election is relevant because it asks where the saving purpose begins.

Does God choose sinners because He foresees that they will independently choose Him?

Or does their eventual faith arise within a gracious purpose that originates in God?

Paul writes:

"For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil..."

— Romans 9:11

He then speaks of:

"the purpose of God according to election."

The Reformed tradition understood this to exclude human merit as the cause of election.

Not According to Works

Paul tells Timothy that God:

"hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace."

— 2 Timothy 1:9

And this grace was:

"given us in Christ Jesus before the world began."

The direction is unmistakable.

God's saving purpose precedes our works.

Grace does not originate in something worthy discovered within fallen man.

The Canons of Dort

The Canons of Dort, produced in 1618–1619, are especially important for our subject because they arose from another controversy concerning grace, election and the human will.

The dispute involved the followers of Jacobus Arminius, commonly known as the Remonstrants, and the Reformed churches that responded to them.

We should not simply equate Erasmus with Arminius.

They belonged to different periods and addressed the issues within different theological frameworks.

Nevertheless, some of the fundamental questions were recognisably similar.

What is the condition of fallen man?

What does grace accomplish?

What explains saving faith?

Is election conditioned upon foreseen faith?

Can grace finally depend upon man's independent decision?

Human Corruption at Dort

Dort describes fallen man in strong terms.

The sinner retains aspects of his created humanity and is not reduced to an irrational creature.

But spiritually he is incapable of producing the saving change required.

Therefore regeneration is necessary.

Again the doctrine does not say:

Man possesses no faculties.

It says:

Those faculties cannot restore themselves from the corruption of sin.

Grace Does More Than Advise

This distinction becomes crucial.

If grace merely provides information, fallen man's fundamental condition remains unchanged.

The Gospel would then function essentially as advice:

Here is what you should do; now produce the necessary spiritual response from your own resources.

The Reformed understanding of regeneration goes further.

God works within the sinner.

He renews the heart and will.

The Will Is Not Destroyed

Dort is particularly useful because it carefully avoids the idea that regeneration destroys the human will.

God does not treat human beings as though they were lifeless objects.

He works upon the will in such a way that the renewed person genuinely believes and obeys.

This is a more precise formulation of a point we have repeatedly needed to make when interpreting Luther.

Grace does not abolish willing.

It liberates the will from its bondage to sin.

Grace Makes the Unwilling Willing

This can be expressed simply:

Grace does not save a man without bringing him to faith; grace brings him willingly to Christ.

The sinner believes.

The sinner repents.

The sinner comes.

But the Reformed confessions trace this saving response back to the gracious operation of God.

Thus Paul's statement remains central:

> *"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."*
>
> — Philippians 2:13

Effectual Calling

The doctrine increasingly came to be described as effectual calling.

The distinction is between the outward proclamation of the Gospel and the inward saving operation of God through His Word and Spirit.

Many may hear the outward proclamation.

Not all believe.

But those whom God effectually calls are brought to faith.

Paul writes:

"Whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified."

— Romans 8:30

The calling in this sequence results in justification.

The Golden Chain

Romans 8:30 became particularly important in Reformed theology:

"Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified."

Later theologians sometimes called this the golden chain of salvation.

The same people move through the sequence:

predestinated;

called;

justified;

glorified.

The saving purpose therefore originates in God and reaches its appointed end.

Where Luther and the Reformed Agree

We can now identify substantial agreement.

Both Luther and the Reformed tradition affirm that fallen man cannot initiate his salvation by an independent spiritual power.

Both reject the idea that divine commands prove natural spiritual ability.

Both insist upon the necessity of the Holy Ghost.

Both teach that salvation excludes human boasting.

Both understand saving faith as dependent upon grace.

Both take seriously God's sovereign purpose.

In these respects the Reformed confessions preserve the central concerns of The Bondage of the Will.

But We Must Not Simply Call Luther a Calvinist

Historical accuracy requires an important warning.

It is anachronistic to describe Luther simply as a Calvinist.

Luther's major argument against Erasmus was published before Calvin's mature theological work.

Nor did the Lutheran and Reformed traditions agree on every doctrine.

Important disagreements developed concerning the Lord's Supper, Christology, predestination and other matters.

Therefore the correct historical relationship is not:

Luther taught Calvinism.

Rather:

Luther and the Reformed tradition shared substantial Augustinian and biblical convictions concerning original sin, human inability and the necessity of sovereign grace, while developing within distinct confessional traditions.

That is a much more accurate statement.

The Importance of the Confessions

The confessions also help us move beyond individual theologians.

Our question is no longer merely:

What did Luther say?

or:

What did Calvin say?

We can now ask:

What did Protestant churches publicly confess?

This is particularly important because confessions generally use more measured language than polemical writings.

They distinguish doctrines carefully and establish boundaries.

The Doctrine Is Becoming More Precise

We can already see the development.

Luther speaks forcefully of the bondage of the will.

The Lutheran Confessions distinguish civil freedom from spiritual inability.

The Reformed confessions increasingly distinguish:

man's condition before the Fall;

man's condition after the Fall;

man's condition after regeneration;

and ultimately:

man's condition in glory.

This framework will become particularly important when we reach the Westminster Confession and the Second London Baptist Confession.

From Continental Europe to England

The doctrine did not remain on the Continent.

The English Reformation produced its own confessional statement in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion.

For our present study, one article is particularly striking.

Article X bears the title:

"Of Free-Will."

Its subject is precisely the question that divided Luther and Erasmus.

And its wording gives us an opportunity to see how the Church of England, in its Reformation formularies, understood fallen man's ability to turn himself towards God.

Alongside Article X we must also consider Article IX on Original Sin, Article XI on Justification and Article XVII on Predestination and Election.

These articles form an important bridge between the Continental Reformation and the later English confessional tradition.

CHAPTER 27

The Thirty-Nine Articles and the English Reformation

The controversy concerning free will did not remain confined to Germany and Switzerland.

As the Reformation developed in England, the same fundamental questions concerning original sin, human ability, justification, grace and predestination required careful definition.

The resulting Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion became one of the principal doctrinal statements of the English Reformation.

For our present study, four articles are especially important:

Article IX — Of Original or Birth-Sin

Article X — Of Free-Will

Article XI — Of the Justification of Man

Article XVII — Of Predestination and Election

Taken together, these articles provide a remarkably clear progression.

Man is fallen.

His natural powers cannot prepare him for saving faith.

Justification is received through Christ by faith rather than earned by works.

And salvation ultimately rests within the gracious purpose of God.

The same fundamental questions that divided Erasmus and Luther therefore appear within the official doctrinal formularies of the English Reformation.

The English Reformation and Continental Theology

The English Reformation developed within circumstances very different from those surrounding Luther in Germany.

Political, ecclesiastical and theological factors all played their part.

We should therefore not treat the Thirty-Nine Articles as merely an English version of The Bondage of the Will.

Nor should we assume that every English Reformer agreed with Luther upon every question.

Nevertheless, the English Reformers were deeply engaged with the theological developments taking place on the Continent.

The doctrines of sin, grace and justification that had become central to the Reformation inevitably entered the English confessional settlement.

Article IX — Original Sin

The logical starting point is Article IX:

Of Original or Birth-Sin

This is important because, as we have repeatedly observed, no doctrine of free will can be properly understood without first asking about the condition of the person whose will is being considered.

The question is not simply:

Does man have a will?

Of course he does.

The question is:

What is the condition of man's will after Adam's Fall?

Article IX therefore comes before Article X.

That order is theologically significant.

Original Sin Is More Than Imitation

Article IX rejects the idea that original sin consists merely in following Adam's bad example.

The Fall affected human nature itself.

This places the English Articles firmly within the Augustinian tradition we traced earlier.

Pelagianism had tended to minimise the inherited consequences of Adam's transgression.

The Reformation confessions rejected such an understanding.

Paul writes:

"By one man's disobedience many were made sinners."

— Romans 5:19

The human problem is therefore deeper than a series of individually isolated sinful acts.

Man acts sinfully because mankind is fallen.

The Corruption of Human Nature

Article IX describes fallen human nature in strong terms.

The natural condition inherited from Adam is not spiritually neutral.

Man is inclined away from the righteousness God requires.

This agrees with Paul's description:

"The carnal mind is enmity against God."

— Romans 8:7

The importance of this becomes apparent when we reach Article X.

If man's nature is corrupted, his will cannot simply be treated as though it remained unaffected by the Fall.

Article X — Of Free-Will

Article X brings us directly to the subject of Luther's controversy with Erasmus.

Its title could hardly be more relevant:

Of Free-Will

The Article declares that man's condition after Adam's Fall is such that he cannot, by his own natural strength and good works, turn and prepare himself to faith and calling upon God.

This is an extraordinarily important statement for our study.

The English Article does not merely say that conversion is difficult without grace.

It says fallen man:

cannot

prepare himself for saving faith by his own natural powers.

The Very Question Erasmus Raised

Recall Erasmus's definition.

He wanted to preserve some power within the human will by which man might apply himself towards those things which lead to salvation.

Article X addresses essentially the same question.

Can fallen man:
turn himself;
prepare himself;
or use his:
natural strength
to bring himself towards faith?

The answer is no.

In this central respect, the Thirty-Nine Articles stand much closer to Luther's conclusion than to any doctrine which gives fallen man an independent first movement towards salvation.

"We Have No Power"

Article X continues by explaining that we have no power to perform works pleasing and acceptable to God without the grace of God through Christ going before us.

This introduces a particularly important expression:

grace must go before.

The theological term often used for such preceding grace is prevenient grace, from a word meaning grace that comes before.

But the expression requires careful handling because different theological traditions have used the term in different ways.

The Article itself should therefore be allowed to define its

meaning.

Grace Goes Before

The essential point is clear.

Man does not make the first spiritually effective movement and then receive grace as a reward.

Grace precedes the good will.

This agrees with the principle we encountered in Philippians:

"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

— Philippians 2:13

God works:

"to will."

The spiritually good willing therefore cannot be treated as wholly independent of grace.

Grace Also Works With Us

But Article X does not stop there.

Grace goes before us so that we may have a good will, and then works with us when we have that good will.

This is an important qualification.

It corresponds to the distinction we made in Chapter 21 between conversion and the Christian life following conversion.

God's grace produces the renewed disposition.

The renewed believer then genuinely acts.

Grace continues to work with him.

Not Passive Christianity

The doctrine of human inability therefore does not produce a Christianity in which believers do nothing.

Paul says:

"I laboured more abundantly than they all."

— 1 Corinthians 15:10

But immediately adds:

"yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."

Paul laboured.

Grace operated.

The two are not enemies.

Grace produces and sustains genuinely Christian activity.

Article X and Luther

The agreement with Luther is therefore substantial but carefully expressed.

Luther had argued that fallen man's will cannot produce the first spiritual movement towards God.

Article X says fallen man cannot turn and prepare himself for faith by his natural strength.

Luther says grace must renew the will.

Article X says God's grace must go before us so that we may have a good will.

The language is more measured than Luther's polemical rhetoric.

The underlying doctrine is recognisably similar.

No Beast-and-Rider Illustration

Notice also what Article X does not do.

It does not describe man as a beast ridden either by God or Satan.

It does not use language which might suggest that human beings possess no meaningful will.

It simply defines man's inability in relation to salvation.

This is one of the advantages of confessional language.

The essential doctrine can be preserved without requiring every controversial illustration Luther employed.

Article XI — Of the Justification of Man

Article XI naturally follows.

If fallen man cannot prepare himself for salvation through his natural powers and good works, upon what basis can he be justified before God?

The Article answers:

not because of our own works or deserving, but through the merit of Jesus Christ and by faith.

This brings the doctrine of the bound will into direct relationship with justification by faith.

Righteousness Must Come from Another

The logic is important.

If man cannot establish the righteousness God requires, his justification must rest upon something outside himself.

Paul writes:

"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."

— Romans 3:28

And:

"Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

— Romans 3:24

The ground of justification is therefore not the sinner's spiritual achievement.

It is Christ.

Faith Does Not Become a Work

This must not be misunderstood.

If justification is by faith, we should not turn faith into a substitute meritorious work.

Faith does not justify because believing is such a worthy human accomplishment that God rewards it.

Faith receives Christ.

Its importance lies in its object.

The sinner looks away from himself towards the righteousness provided in Christ.

This is precisely the movement at the heart of Reformation theology.

The Bound Will and Justification

We can therefore see why Luther regarded the question of free will as so important.

Suppose fallen man possesses an independent spiritual capacity to begin his movement towards salvation.

The decisive difference between believer and unbeliever may then be traced partly to man's own spiritual contribution.

But if even the beginning of saving faith requires grace, salvation is traced back to God's mercy.

The doctrine of justification then rests naturally alongside the doctrine of human inability.

The sinner contributes no righteousness by which he can demand acceptance before God.

Article XVII — Predestination and Election

The fourth Article particularly relevant to our study is Article XVII:

Of Predestination and Election

Here the English Articles move from man's condition and justification to God's eternal purpose.

Predestination to life is presented as God's everlasting purpose concerning those whom He has chosen in Christ.

The doctrine therefore places salvation within a purpose that precedes the believer's historical conversion.

Paul writes:

> *"According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world."*
>
> — Ephesians 1:4

And:

> *"Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself."*
>
> — Ephesians 1:5

Calling According to God's Purpose

Article XVII follows a sequence recognisable from Romans 8.

Paul writes:

> *"Whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified."*
>
> — Romans 8:30

Thus election is not treated as an isolated speculative doctrine.

It leads to calling.

Calling leads to justification.

The purpose of God reaches into the actual salvation of His people.

Predestination and Assurance

Article XVII also treats the doctrine pastorally.

The godly consideration of predestination and election in Christ is presented as capable of bringing comfort to believers.

This is significant because predestination can easily be treated in

precisely the opposite way.

A person may become obsessed with the hidden decree and ask: Am I secretly elect?

But we have already seen why such speculation is dangerous.

The Article directs attention towards election in Christ.

The Danger of Misusing Predestination

Article XVII also warns against those who lack the Spirit of Christ continually setting God's predestination before their eyes in a manner that leads them into dangerous spiritual speculation.

This is remarkably relevant to our discussion in Chapter 22 concerning Luther's hidden God.

The secret counsel of God is not given as an alternative object of faith.

The sinner is directed towards God's revealed promises in Christ.

Follow God's Revealed Will

The Article therefore gives a particularly valuable practical rule.

We are to receive God's promises in the manner in which they are generally set forth to us in Holy Scripture.

And in our actions we are to follow the will of God expressly declared in His Word.

This is very close to the principle we drew from:

> *"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us."*
>
> — Deuteronomy 29:29

This provides an important safeguard against speculation.

Election Must Lead Us to Christ

Predestination is therefore not intended to drive the sinner away from the Gospel.

The Gospel says:

> *"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."*
>
> — Acts 16:31

That is the revealed command and promise.

The sinner does not need to obtain access to God's eternal decree before believing.

He is commanded to believe Christ.

The doctrine of election explains salvation from God's perspective.

It does not replace the Gospel as the means by which sinners are called.

The Four Articles Together

We can now see the theological progression:

Article IX — Original Sin:

Man is fallen and corrupted through Adam.

Article X — Free Will:

Fallen man cannot turn and prepare himself for saving faith by his natural powers; grace must go before.

Article XI — Justification:

The sinner is justified through Christ by faith rather than by his own works or deserving.

Article XVII — Predestination:

The salvation of God's people rests within His eternal gracious purpose in Christ.

This is a coherent doctrine of salvation.

How Close Is This to Luther?

On the central question of the human will, the agreement is considerable.

Luther said fallen man cannot produce the movement by which he comes savingly to God.

Article X says fallen man cannot turn and prepare himself for faith by his own natural strength.

Luther insisted that grace must act upon the will.

Article X says grace must precede the good will.

Luther excluded human merit.

Article XI excludes our works and deserving as the ground of justification.

Luther strongly affirmed divine election.

Article XVII places salvation within God's eternal purpose.

But the English Articles Are Not The Bondage of the Will

We should nevertheless maintain historical precision.

The Thirty-Nine Articles are not simply Luther translated into English.

They arose within the English Reformation and reflect a broader

Protestant theological inheritance.

Nor do they reproduce every conclusion Luther drew concerning necessity, foreknowledge, hardening or the hidden God.

Their purpose is confessional rather than polemical.

In some respects this makes them particularly useful for our study.

They show how the central Reformation doctrine could be expressed without Luther's more provocative rhetoric.

An Important Historical Bridge

The Thirty-Nine Articles also provide a bridge to the next stage of our study.

The English Reformation did not end theological debate concerning predestination, free will and grace.

During the following century these doctrines would receive much fuller treatment among English and Scottish Reformed theologians.

The result was one of the most influential Protestant confessions ever produced:

The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646.

Here the subject of free will receives an entire chapter.

And its structure is especially helpful because it traces the human will through four different conditions:

man in his original state;

man after the Fall;

man in the state of grace;

and:

man in the state of glory.

This gives us one of the clearest confessional answers to the question with which our entire study began:

What was lost when Adam fell, and what remains of man's ability to turn to God?

CHAPTER 28

The Westminster Confession and the Four States of the Human Will

We have now followed the controversy concerning the human will from Augustine and Pelagius, through Erasmus and Luther, into the Lutheran and Reformed confessional traditions and then into

the Thirty-Nine Articles of the English Reformation.

The next major development brings us to the Westminster Confession of Faith, completed by the Westminster Assembly in the seventeenth century.

For our particular study, the Westminster Confession is especially valuable because it does something that helps clarify much of the controversy surrounding the expression free will.

Instead of speaking about the human will as though it always exists in precisely the same spiritual condition, the Confession considers man's will according to the different states in which man exists.

These may be summarised as:

man in the state of innocency;
man in the state of sin;
man in the state of grace;
and:
man in the state of glory.

This provides an important answer to a question raised in the Editor's Introduction to our edition of The Bondage of the Will:

> **What was lost when Adam fell, and what remains of man's ability to turn to God?**

The Westminster Confession gives a carefully structured answer.

The Historical Setting

The Westminster Assembly first met in 1643 during a period of profound political and ecclesiastical upheaval in England.

Its work produced the Westminster Confession of Faith together with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms.

The Confession was not Lutheran.

It belonged firmly within the Reformed theological tradition.

Nevertheless, when it addresses original sin, free will and conversion, we encounter many of the same fundamental questions Luther had debated with Erasmus more than a century earlier.

By this stage, however, the language has become considerably more systematic.

Four Chapters Are Particularly Important

For our purposes four chapters of the Westminster Confession

should be considered together:

Chapter III — Of God's Eternal Decree
Chapter VI — Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of thePunishment thereof
Chapter IX — Of Free Will
Chapter X — Of Effectual Calling

The order is significant.

God's sovereign purpose is considered.

Then man's Fall is described.

Then the condition of man's will is defined.

Finally, the Confession explains how fallen sinners are brought savingly to Christ.

These doctrines form a connected whole.

God's Eternal Decree

Chapter III begins with the sovereignty of God.

The Confession teaches that God, from eternity, ordained whatsoever comes to pass, while immediately guarding that doctrine against two serious misunderstandings.

God is not thereby made the author of sin, and the liberty or contingency of secondary causes is not destroyed.

This is precisely the territory we encountered when considering Luther's arguments concerning divine foreknowledge, Pharaoh and the hardening of the heart.

Sovereignty Without Making God the Author of Sin

The qualification is extremely important.

The doctrine of divine sovereignty must never be expressed in such a way that moral evil is attributed to God.

Scripture says:

"God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man."

— James 1:13

Yet Scripture also teaches that God's purpose governs history.

The crucifixion remains the clearest example.

Christ was:

"delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God."

— Acts 2:23

Yet those who crucified Him acted:

"by wicked hands."

One event therefore involved God's righteous purpose and man's wicked action.

Secondary Causes Remain Real

Westminster's reference to secondary causes is also important.

God's sovereignty does not mean that created causes cease to be genuine causes.

Human beings think, choose and act.

Their decisions matter.

Their actions produce consequences.

Divine sovereignty does not require us to describe the created world as an illusion in which God is the only meaningful actor.

This is a useful refinement when compared with some of Luther's stronger rhetoric.

Election in Christ

Chapter III also speaks of God's election of His people to everlasting life.

The ground of election is not foreseen human merit.

The saving purpose originates in God.

This follows the Pauline pattern:

> *"According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world."*
>
> — Ephesians 1:4

The doctrine therefore places the ultimate origin of salvation outside the sinner.

This agrees with Luther's central concern.

Grace does not begin because man first distinguishes himself from other sinners.

The Fall of Man

Chapter VI then turns to Adam.

This is essential because Chapter IX's doctrine of free will cannot be understood without it.

The Confession teaches that our first parents were seduced by Satan and sinned by eating the forbidden fruit.

Through this Fall they lost their original righteousness and communion with God and became corrupted in their faculties.

This is the transition upon which the whole doctrine of the bound will depends.

Man Was Not Created in Bondage to Sin

This must be emphasised.

God did not create Adam morally corrupt.

Man was created upright.

Ecclesiastes says:

> *"God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions."*
>
> — Ecclesiastes 7:29

The bondage of the will therefore belongs to man's fallen condition, not to humanity as originally created.

This immediately helps us answer a common misunderstanding of Luther.

To say that fallen man's will is bound does not mean that God originally created human nature incapable of righteousness.

Something happened.

Man fell.

The Fall Affected the Whole Person

The Confession understands the effects of the Fall as extending throughout man's nature.

This does not mean that fallen man becomes as wicked as he could possibly be.

Nor does it mean that every person manifests sin in precisely the same manner or degree.

Rather, no faculty of fallen man remains spiritually untouched by sin.

The mind is affected.

The affections are affected.

The will is affected.

The body itself becomes subject to death.

From Adam to His Posterity

The corruption arising from Adam's Fall does not remain confined to Adam.

Paul writes:

"By one man's disobedience many were made sinners."

— Romans 5:19

Thus Westminster follows the Augustinian and Reformed doctrine of original sin.

This is why the question concerning free will cannot begin by imagining fallen man as spiritually neutral.

The person exercising the will is already a fallen person.

Chapter IX — Of Free Will

We now arrive at the chapter of greatest importance to our study.

Westminster deliberately retains the expression:

Free Will

This is interesting.

Luther had sometimes objected strongly to the expression itself because he believed it attributed to fallen man a spiritual power he did not possess.

Westminster takes a different approach.

It keeps the terminology but defines it according to man's different spiritual conditions.

This is arguably more precise.

Man Possesses Natural Liberty

The opening section affirms that God has endowed the human will with natural liberty.

Man is not forced by an absolute necessity of nature to choose good or evil as though he were an inanimate object.

This preserves genuine human willing.

People choose.

They act voluntarily.

They are responsible.

The Confession therefore refuses to equate divine sovereignty with fatalism.

This Qualifies Luther's Stronger Language

Here Westminster gives us useful language for interpreting Luther.

If The Bondage of the Will were understood to mean:

Human beings do not really choose anything,

Westminster would reject that conclusion.

If it means:

Fallen man does not possess the spiritual ability to convert himself to God,

Westminster strongly agrees.

This distinction is one of the most useful results of following the doctrine beyond Luther.

The First State — Man in Innocency

The second section of Chapter IX considers Adam before the Fall.

In the state of innocency, man possessed freedom and power to will and to do what was good and pleasing to God.

But this condition was mutable.

Adam could fall.

And he did.

We may summarise his condition as:

Able to obey God, but able also to fall into sin.

This is very different from the condition of fallen man.

Adam's Will Was Upright

Adam did not require regeneration before he could obey God because he had not yet fallen.

His nature was upright.

His will corresponded to that condition.

The question debated between Luther and Erasmus therefore concerns not Adam as originally created, but Adam's fallen descendants.

This distinction is fundamental.

The Second State — Man Fallen

The third section of Chapter IX brings us directly to Luther's controversy.

Through the Fall into a state of sin, man has lost the ability to will any spiritual good accompanying salvation.

The language is carefully limited.

It does not say that fallen man has lost the ability to make every kind of choice.

It says that he has lost ability concerning:

spiritual good accompanying salvation.

That is essentially the distinction we have been making throughout this book.

Fallen Man Still Chooses

A fallen man may choose to work.

He may choose to marry.

He may choose to give money to someone in need.

He may choose to read Scripture.

He may even choose outward participation in religious worship.

The doctrine of spiritual inability does not require us to deny these things.

But none of them proves that he possesses the natural power to regenerate his heart or produce saving faith.

Unable to Convert Himself

Westminster therefore teaches that fallen man cannot, by his own strength, convert himself or prepare himself for conversion.

We have heard almost exactly this language before.

Article X of the Thirty-Nine Articles declared that fallen man cannot:

"turn and prepare himself"

to faith by his own natural strength.

And this was precisely the question Erasmus had raised.

Does there remain within fallen man some small power by which he can apply himself towards salvation?

Westminster's answer is no.

The Agreement with Luther Is Clear

At this point the theological line is unmistakable.

Luther denied that fallen man's independent will could initiate conversion.

The Augsburg Confession denied natural spiritual ability.

The Thirty-Nine Articles said man cannot turn and prepare himself for faith by natural strength.

Westminster says fallen man cannot convert himself or prepare himself for conversion.

The formulations differ.

The central doctrine remains.

The Third State — Man in Grace

But Westminster does not stop with fallen man's inability.

This is extremely important.

When God converts a sinner and brings him into the state of grace, He frees him from his natural bondage under sin and enables him freely to will and do what is spiritually good.

Here we see the positive side of the doctrine.

Grace liberates the will.

The Son Makes Free

Christ says:

"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

— John 8:36

This is genuine spiritual freedom.

The regenerate believer possesses an ability that he did not possess in his fallen, unregenerate condition.

Grace has changed him.

This demonstrates again why the expression bondage of the will must not be treated as the final description of redeemed humanity.

The Gospel brings liberation.

Yet the Believer Is Not Perfect

Westminster immediately introduces another qualification.

The regenerate believer does not yet possess perfect freedom from sin.

Remaining corruption continues.

The believer therefore experiences conflict.

Paul describes such conflict:

"For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh."

— Galatians 5:17

The Christian has been renewed.

But he has not yet been glorified.

He therefore wills what is spiritually good while still experiencing the influence of remaining sin.

This Explains Christian Experience

The distinction is pastorally important.

A believer may genuinely love Christ and still struggle with sin.

The existence of that struggle does not necessarily demonstrate the absence of grace.

Indeed, the conflict itself arises because new spiritual desires now oppose the remaining corruption.

Before regeneration there was no such principle of spiritual life.

Now there is.

The Fourth State — Man in Glory

The final section of Chapter IX looks beyond the present Christian life.

Only in the state of glory is man's will made perfectly and immutably free to good alone.

This produces the fourth condition:

Man glorified — free to good and no longer able to fall into sin.

The progression is therefore complete.

The Four States

We can summarise Westminster's doctrine as follows:

State	Condition of the will
Innocency	Able to do good; able to fall
Fall	Unable of himself to will spiritual good accompanying salvation
Grace	Renewed and enabled to will spiritual good, yet still struggling with remaining sin
Glory	Perfectly and permanently free to good

This is one of the clearest answers we have encountered to the question:

Is man's will free?

The answer is:

We must first ask in what spiritual state man is being considered.

Chapter X — Effectual Calling

Westminster then explains how the sinner moves from the second state to the third.

How does the man who cannot convert himself become converted?

Chapter X answers:

God effectually calls him.

The transition is therefore attributed to divine grace.

Called by Word and Spirit

God calls His people through His Word and Spirit.

This is important.

The doctrine does not dispense with the Gospel.

The Word is proclaimed.

The Holy Ghost works through and with that Word.

The sinner is enlightened and renewed.

This corresponds to Lydia:

> *"whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul."*

— Acts 16:14

Paul speaks.

Lydia hears.

The Lord opens the heart.

Lydia responds.

The Will Is Renewed

The Confession's language concerning effectual calling is especially relevant to our study because it describes God as renewing the will.

That expression may be more helpful than simply speaking of the destruction of free will.

The will is not removed.

It is renewed.

The sinner is enabled to answer the call of the Gospel and to embrace Christ.

Made Willing by Grace

This brings together divine sovereignty and genuine human response.

God does not believe instead of the sinner.

The sinner believes.

God does not repent instead of the sinner.

The sinner repents.

God does not come to Christ instead of the sinner.

The sinner comes.

But the renewed ability and willingness by which these things occur are attributed to grace.

Thus:

God's grace does not eliminate the human response; it produces a willing human response.

"Most Freely"

This point deserves emphasis.

Effectual calling should not be imagined as God dragging sinners unwillingly into Christ.

The sinner comes willingly because grace has renewed his heart.

The person who once loved darkness now sees Christ differently.

The Gospel which once appeared foolish becomes precious.

Paul writes:

"But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness;

But unto them which are called... Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God."

— 1 Corinthians 1:23–24

The difference is connected with calling.

Westminster and The Bondage of the Will

We can now make a direct comparison.

Luther's central claim was that fallen man does not possess an independent spiritual power by which he can bring himself to God.

Westminster agrees.

Luther argued that grace must act upon the will.

Westminster speaks of God renewing the will.

Luther maintained that the renewed sinner genuinely believes and acts.

Westminster says the sinner comes to Christ most freely once

made willing by grace.

Luther distinguished ordinary earthly ability from spiritual ability.

Westminster carefully limits fallen man's inability to spiritual good accompanying salvation.

There is therefore substantial theological continuity.

Where Westminster Is More Precise

But Westminster improves considerably upon some of Luther's terminology.

Instead of simply saying:

The will is bound,

it asks:

Which man? In which state? Bound with respect to what?

That is a much more precise question.

Adam before the Fall was not bound to sin.

The fallen sinner is unable to convert himself.

The regenerate believer has been liberated but remains imperfect.

The glorified saint will possess perfect freedom to good.

The doctrine becomes dynamic rather than static.

Free Will Was Not Destroyed; Its Spiritual Condition Changed

This allows us to formulate the matter carefully.

The Fall did not remove the human faculty of willing.

It corrupted man's moral and spiritual condition.

Therefore fallen man still wills, but he does not possess within himself the power to restore his relationship with God.

Grace does not recreate him as something other than human.

It renews the human being God originally made.

And ultimately, in glory, the redeemed will reaches a freedom greater than Adam possessed before the Fall because it will no longer be capable of falling away.

From Westminster to the Particular Baptists

We have now reached a particularly important point for our study.

The Westminster Confession was completed in 1646.

In the same period, the Particular Baptists in England were producing their own confessional statements.

Their First London Baptist Confession, issued in 1644 and revised in 1646, already expressed a strongly Reformed doctrine of salvation.

Later, in 1677, Particular Baptists produced another confession which became publicly associated with the General Assembly of 1689 and is now commonly known as the:

Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.

Its relationship to Westminster is unmistakable.

Large portions follow Westminster closely, although important changes were made, particularly concerning the Church, baptism and covenant theology.

For our present study, however, something particularly striking occurs.

The Baptist Confession retains Westminster's chapter:

Of Free Will

and its chapter:

Of Effectual Calling.

We have therefore travelled from Erasmus's Diatribe and Luther's Bondage of the Will to a Particular Baptist confession written more than 150 years later—and the same fundamental question remains explicitly present.

This is particularly significant because it enables us to ask:

How did the Particular Baptists understand the freedom and bondage of man's will?

And, more importantly:

How closely does their confession agree with Luther's central argument in *The Bondage of the Will?*

That is the subject to which we now turn.

CHAPTER 29

The Second London Baptist Confession of 1689 — Of Free Will

We have now reached a confessional statement of particular importance to our study.

More than 150 years after Luther published The Bondage of the Will, the Particular Baptists of England adopted a confession which addressed the same fundamental questions concerning man's fall, his spiritual ability, the work of divine grace and the nature of saving faith.

The confession was first issued in 1677 and later publicly owned by Particular Baptist churches at the General Assembly held in London in 1689. It consequently became commonly known as the:

Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.

For our purposes, five chapters are especially important:

Chapter 3 — Of God's Decree
Chapter 6 — Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment Thereof
Chapter 9 — Of Free Will
Chapter 10 — Of Effectual Calling
Chapter 11 — Of Justification

Taken together, these chapters give a remarkably complete answer to the question that stood at the centre of the controversy between Erasmus and Luther.

The Particular Baptist Setting

The Particular Baptists emerged in seventeenth-century England as churches holding to believers' baptism while sharing much of the Reformed understanding of salvation.

Their theology did not begin with the Second London Confession.

The earlier First London Baptist Confession of 1644, revised in 1646, had already expressed a strongly Calvinistic or Reformed understanding of God's saving grace.

By the time of the Second London Confession, however, the Particular Baptists chose to express much of their doctrine in language closely related to the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration.

This demonstrated substantial agreement with the wider Reformed tradition while maintaining distinct Baptist convictions.

Why This Matters for Our Study

The importance of the 1689 Confession is not that the Particular Baptists simply repeated Luther.

They did not.

More than a century and a half of theological and confessional development separates them from The Bondage of the Will.

Yet when they came to define free will, they reached a conclusion remarkably consistent with the central argument Luther had defended against Erasmus.

Fallen man possesses a will.

He makes genuine choices.

He remains responsible.

But he cannot, by his natural powers, convert himself to God.

Grace must intervene.

Chapter 3 — Of God's Decree

The Confession begins its treatment of God's decree with a strong affirmation of divine sovereignty.

God's eternal purpose encompasses whatsoever comes to pass.

But, like Westminster, the Baptist Confession immediately places important boundaries around that statement.

God is not the author of sin.

Violence is not done to the will of the creature.

The liberty and contingency of secondary causes are not removed but established.

These qualifications are extremely important in light of our earlier examination of Luther.

God Is Sovereign

Scripture plainly presents God as governing history.

Paul writes:

"Who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will."

— Ephesians 1:11

Nothing takes God by surprise.

His purpose does not depend upon His discovering what creatures will independently do and then adjusting His plan accordingly.

Yet divine sovereignty does not transform man's sinful actions into God's sin.

God Is Not the Author of Sin

Scripture says:

"God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."

— 1 John 1:5

And:

"God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man."

— James 1:13

The Confession therefore guards divine sovereignty with divine holiness.

This is particularly valuable when compared with some of Luther's more provocative language concerning necessity.

The sovereignty of God must never be stated in a way that makes God morally responsible for man's wickedness.

Nor Is Violence Done to the Creature's Will

This qualification is equally relevant.

God's decree does not mean that human beings cease to act willingly.

Joseph's brothers genuinely intended evil.

God intended good through the same event:

"But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good."

— Genesis 50:20

Their intentions remained their own.

God's sovereign purpose did not make their wicked intention righteous.

Nor did their wickedness frustrate God's good purpose.

Election

Chapter 3 also places the salvation of God's people within His eternal election.

God's choice does not arise from foreseen faith or good works as though He first looked into history, discovered who would independently choose Him, and then elected those people in response.

The direction is from God's gracious purpose to the salvation of His people.

Paul writes:

"According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world."

— Ephesians 1:4

This places the ultimate origin of salvation in God rather than man.

Chapter 6 — Of the Fall of Man

The Confession then explains what happened to mankind through Adam's transgression.

This is indispensable to Chapter 9.

We cannot understand the Baptist doctrine of free will unless we first understand its doctrine of the Fall.

Adam and Eve were originally created upright.

Their corruption was not part of God's original creation.

Through their sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God.

The Fall Affected Human Nature

The consequences extended beyond the first sinful act.

Human nature became corrupted.

This agrees with Paul's teaching:

"By one man's disobedience many were made sinners."

— Romans 5:19

Thus the descendants of Adam are not born in the spiritual condition Adam possessed before the Fall.

This is the fundamental fact Erasmus's doctrine of free will had to confront.

The question is not what an unfallen human will might accomplish.

It is what fallen man can accomplish towards his own salvation.

Sin Affects the Whole Man

The Confession understands corruption as extending throughout man's nature.

This should not be misunderstood as saying every person is as wicked as he could possibly become.

Rather, every aspect of man's nature has been affected by the Fall.

His understanding is affected.

His affections are affected.

His will is affected.

Therefore salvation cannot consist merely of supplying additional information to an otherwise spiritually neutral person.

The person himself requires renewal.

Chapter 9 — Of Free Will

We now arrive at the chapter most directly relevant to Luther

and Erasmus.

Its title is simply:

Of Free Will

Like Westminster, the Baptist Confession retains the expression free will.

But it carefully defines the nature of that freedom.

Natural Liberty

The opening paragraph affirms that God has endowed man's will with natural liberty and power of acting upon choice.

The will is neither forced nor determined by an absolute necessity of nature to good or evil.

This is an important qualification of any careless reading of The Bondage of the Will.

The Particular Baptists did not understand human beings as machines.

They make genuine choices.

They possess wills.

Their actions proceed voluntarily.

Then What Is Bound?

The question therefore becomes much more precise.

If man possesses natural liberty, what does it mean to say that his will is bound?

The answer concerns his moral and spiritual ability.

The bondage does not consist in the absence of choice.

It consists in man's fallen inability to choose spiritual good in a manner leading to salvation from the resources of his corrupted nature.

This distinction is crucial.

Man in the State of Innocency

Chapter 9 next considers man as originally created.

In the state of innocency, man possessed freedom and power to will and do what was good and pleasing to God.

Adam was therefore not created spiritually enslaved.

He possessed genuine righteousness.

But his condition was mutable.

He could fall from it.

And he did.

The Original Human Will

This brings us back to the opening question of our study.

What did Adam originally possess?

He possessed a will capable of righteousness.

The bondage described by Luther therefore cannot be regarded as essential to human nature itself.

It is the consequence of the Fall.

That distinction protects both the goodness of God's creation and the reality of man's subsequent corruption.

Man in the State of Sin

The third paragraph brings us directly to the heart of the controversy.

Through his fall into a state of sin, man has lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation.

The Confession then explains the consequence.

Natural man, being opposed to spiritual good and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength to convert himself or prepare himself for conversion.

This is perhaps the most important statement in the whole Confession for our present study.

Erasmus's Question Answered

Recall Erasmus's attempt to preserve a limited power in man's free choice by which he might apply himself towards the things leading to salvation.

The Particular Baptist answer, more than 150 years later, is explicit.

Natural man cannot:

convert himself

or:

prepare himself thereunto.

The central issue debated in 1525 therefore receives a clear confessional answer in the Baptist tradition.

"Dead in Sin"

The reason given is also significant.

Man is:

dead in sin.

This follows Paul's language:

"And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins."

— Ephesians 2:1

The sinner does not merely require encouragement to make better use of an otherwise spiritually healthy will.

He requires life.

And the giver of that life is God.

Unable, Yet Responsible

The Confession does not conclude that fallen man is therefore innocent.

His inability is not the inability of a person who desperately loves God but is prevented by some external force from coming to Him.

Christ describes fallen man's condition morally:

"Men loved darkness rather than light."

— John 3:19

The bondage involves man's own sinful desires.

Therefore inability and responsibility remain together.

Man in the State of Grace

The fourth paragraph describes what happens when God converts a sinner.

God frees him from his natural bondage under sin and, by grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do what is spiritually good.

Notice the transformation.

The will has not disappeared.

It has been liberated.

Grace Alone

The expression is especially appropriate:

by his grace alone

the sinner is enabled to will spiritual good.

This brings us directly back to Luther's concern.

The source of the new spiritual ability is not an independent remnant of unfallen power hidden within natural man.

It is grace.

God acts.

The sinner is renewed.

The renewed sinner then willingly acts.

Not Perfect Yet

But the regenerate Christian remains imperfect.

Because of remaining corruption, he does not perfectly or only will what is good.

He may still will what is evil.

This corresponds to the Christian conflict described by Paul:

"For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh."

— Galatians 5:17

Regeneration is real.

Glorification has not yet occurred.

Man in the State of Glory

The final paragraph completes the doctrine.

Only in glory is man's will made perfectly and immutably free to good alone.

This means the redeemed believer will one day possess a freedom greater in one important respect than Adam possessed before the Fall.

Adam was righteous but capable of falling.

The glorified believer will be righteous and no longer capable of falling into sin.

True Freedom Reached in Glory

This gives us a striking biblical and theological progression:

Creation — freedom with the possibility of falling.

Fall — bondage to sin.

Grace — genuine spiritual freedom, but with remaining corruption.

Glory — perfect and permanent freedom to righteousness.

The Christian doctrine of salvation is therefore ultimately a doctrine of liberation.

Bondage is not the final word.

Chapter 10 — Of Effectual Calling

How does man pass from the state of sin into the state of grace?

Chapter 10 answers:

Through God's effectual calling.

Those whom God has predestinated to life are effectually called by His Word and Spirit.

Again we find the connection between God's eternal purpose

and the sinner's actual historical conversion.

Enlightening the Mind

The Confession describes God as enlightening the mind spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God.

This is necessary because fallen man's problem includes his understanding.

Paul says:

"The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God."

— 1 Corinthians 2:14

Conversion therefore involves illumination.

Taking Away the Heart of Stone

The Confession also uses the language of Ezekiel.

God removes the heart of stone and gives a heart of flesh.

The biblical source is clear:

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."

— Ezekiel 36:26

The sinner does not perform spiritual surgery upon himself.

God gives the new heart.

Renewing the Will

Then comes a phrase of particular importance:

renewing their wills

This is perhaps one of the clearest ways of stating what Luther was attempting to defend.

Grace does not abolish the will.

God renews it.

The problem was never that man possessed a will.

The problem was the fallen condition of the person willing.

The solution is renewal.

Drawing to Christ

The Confession then speaks of God drawing sinners effectually to Jesus Christ.

Christ says:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."

— John 6:44

But again, divine drawing does not produce an unwilling believer.

The person comes willingly because grace has changed the heart.

"Yet So as They Come Most Freely"

This is one of the most important qualifications in the doctrine.

Those effectually called come to Christ freely.

Why?

Because they have been made willing by grace.

That provides an extraordinarily useful answer to the common objection:

If God effectually calls the sinner, is the sinner forced to believe against his will?

No.

God renews the will.

The sinner then willingly comes.

Power and Willingness

We therefore return to the principle expressed in the Psalm:

"Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power."

— Psalm 110:3

Divine power and human willingness are not enemies.

Grace produces willingness.

Chapter 11 — Of Justification

The doctrine naturally leads to justification.

If fallen man cannot convert himself and if even his coming to Christ depends upon grace, upon what ground does God justify him?

The Confession emphatically excludes anything wrought in the sinner as the ground of his justification.

The answer is Christ.

Christ's Righteousness

The sinner is justified because of Christ's obedience and satisfaction, received by faith.

Thus salvation directs the believer entirely away from his own merit.

Paul writes:

"Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

— Romans 3:24

And:

"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."

— Romans 3:28

Faith Is Not the Ground of Merit

Even faith must not be transformed into the meritorious basis of justification.

Faith receives Christ.

The believer is not justified because the act of believing possesses sufficient moral worth to purchase salvation.

The righteousness upon which justification rests is found in Christ.

This preserves the central Reformation distinction between faith and works.

Luther and the 1689 Confession

We can now make the comparison directly.

Luther: Fallen man cannot turn himself savingly towards God.

1689: Natural man cannot by his own strength convert himself or prepare himself for conversion.

Luther: Grace must act upon the will.

1689: God renews the will.

Luther: The sinner brought by grace genuinely believes.

1689: Those effectually called come to Christ most freely, being made willing by grace.

Luther: Salvation excludes boasting in man's independent spiritual contribution.

1689: Salvation arises from God's decree, effectual calling and grace, while justification rests entirely upon Christ.

The continuity is substantial.

But the 1689 Confession Is More Carefully Defined

The Baptist Confession gives us something Luther's controversial work does not provide so systematically.

It distinguishes the different conditions of man's will.

It preserves natural liberty.

It explicitly denies that violence is done to the creature's will.

It distinguishes inability in salvation from ordinary human choice.

It describes regeneration as the renewing, rather than destruction,

of the will.

And it describes effectually called sinners as coming to Christ:

most freely.

This language helps us retain Luther's central biblical insight while avoiding some possible misunderstandings created by his rhetoric.

A Particular Baptist Answer to Erasmus

We can therefore answer a question that has accompanied us throughout this book.

Had Erasmus asked the Particular Baptists of 1689:

Does fallen man possess some natural power by which he can prepare himself for saving grace?

their answer would have been:

No.

Had he then asked:

Does this mean man has no will and makes no genuine choices?

their answer would again have been:

No.

And had he asked:

How then does the sinner come willingly to Christ?

their answer would have been:

God renews his will and makes him willing by grace.

That is a remarkably precise resolution of the central issue.

From Luther to the Particular Baptists

We have now traced the doctrine across more than a century and a half.

The controversy began long before Luther, in the biblical questions surrounding Adam, sin and grace.

It appeared dramatically in Augustine's conflict with Pelagius.

It re-emerged in the exchange between Erasmus and Luther.

It entered the Lutheran Confessions.

It developed within the Reformed churches.

It appeared explicitly in Article X of the Thirty-Nine Articles.

It received systematic expression at Westminster.

And it was deliberately retained by the Particular Baptists in their Second London Confession.

The historical line should not be oversimplified into a claim that

each group merely copied Luther.

But there is unmistakable continuity around one central conviction:

Fallen man cannot be the author of his own spiritual restoration. Salvation must originate in the grace of God.

And this brings us to an important final historical question.

The Particular Baptists did not first appear in 1689.

Their earlier confession had been published in London in 1644, with a revised edition in 1646—the very period in which the Westminster Assembly was meeting.

If we are to understand the Baptist reception of the doctrine properly, we should not jump directly from Westminster to 1689 without asking what the First London Baptist Confession had already taught.

That is especially appropriate because it allows us to distinguish doctrines genuinely present among the early Particular Baptists from language later shared with Westminster and the Savoy Declaration.

The First London Baptist Confession

The First London Baptist Confession, first published in 1644 and enlarged in 1646, represents the earliest mature doctrinal statement of the Particular Baptists. Although these churches shared much with the English Puritans and were deeply indebted to the theology of the Reformation, they did not merely borrow their doctrine from Presbyterians or Independents. Their confession demonstrates that they had already embraced the great doctrines of grace while distinguishing themselves on questions of church government, baptism, and the constitution of the visible church.

The confession stands firmly within the Augustinian and Reformation tradition concerning the fall of man and the sovereignty of divine grace. Like Luther, it teaches that mankind has become wholly unable to recover himself from the misery into which Adam's transgression brought the human race. Salvation is therefore entirely of God's mercy and not the result of man's free choice or natural ability.

The language is not always identical to that of Luther or Calvin, nor does it employ every expression found in The Bondage of the Will. Nevertheless, the substance is unmistakably the same. Fallen man is spiritually dead, unable to believe apart from divine grace, while God's eternal purpose of election ensures the salvation of His people. Faith itself is presented as the gracious gift of God rather than the product of autonomous human decision.

This is particularly significant because the confession predates both the Savoy Declaration of 1658 and the Second London Baptist Confession of 1677/1689. It demonstrates that these doctrines were not later borrowed from Westminster, but already formed part of the theological convictions of the early Particular Baptists.

For readers of Luther, this provides another important historical link. The doctrines defended so vigorously in The Bondage of the Will did not disappear with the Reformation. They continued through the Reformed churches and were received, confessed, and preached by the earliest Calvinistic Baptists in England. The same understanding of man's spiritual inability and God's sovereign grace became a defining feature of Baptist theology for generations to come.

The Second London Baptist Confession (1677/1689)

The Second London Baptist Confession, first published anonymously in 1677 and formally adopted by more than one hundred Particular Baptist churches at the General Assembly of 1689, represents the fullest and most mature expression of seventeenth-century Baptist theology. While differing from the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration on matters relating to baptism, church government, and the nature of the visible church, it deliberately retained their doctrinal teaching concerning God, Scripture, sin, grace, and salvation.

This was no mere imitation. The Particular Baptists recognised

that they stood within the same theological tradition as the Reformers and the English Puritans. They believed that the doctrines recovered during the Reformation were the doctrines taught by Holy Scripture itself. Consequently, where they agreed with Westminster, they did so because they believed both confessions faithfully reflected the teaching of God's Word.

The confession begins, appropriately, with the doctrine of Holy Scripture. Like Luther, the Particular Baptists recognised that Scripture alone is the supreme and infallible authority in all matters of faith and practice. Every doctrine, including that of the bondage of the human will, must therefore be established from the written Word of God rather than from human philosophy, ecclesiastical tradition, or the conclusions of unaided reason.

Its doctrine of the Fall leaves no room for the idea that fallen man possesses the natural ability to turn to God. Through Adam's first transgression, mankind became estranged from God dead in trespasses and sins, wholly defiled in every faculty of soul and body, and utterly unable to recover himself. The confession therefore stands firmly alongside Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and the Reformed confessions in affirming the total inability of fallen humanity.

From this foundation flows the confession's teaching concerning God's eternal decree, unconditional election, effectual calling, justification by faith alone, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. Salvation, from beginning to end, is presented as the sovereign work of God's free and undeserved grace. Even faith itself is described as the gift of God, produced in the hearts of His elect by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel.

In this respect, the Second London Baptist Confession demonstrates that the central arguments defended by Luther in The Bondage of the Will did not belong merely to sixteenth-century Lutheranism. They became part of the common theological inheritance of the Reformed churches and the Particular Baptists

alike. Although Baptists differed from other Protestants in matters of church order and baptism, they confessed the same great truths concerning the sovereignty of God, the corruption of human nature, and the absolute necessity of divine grace in salvation.

For this reason, the Second London Baptist Confession remains one of the clearest and most carefully balanced summaries of biblical doctrine ever produced. It stands as a fitting conclusion to the historical development traced throughout this study, showing that the principles defended by Augustine against Pelagius, recovered by Luther during the Reformation, and developed by the Reformed churches were also embraced and confessed by the Particular Baptists. The doctrine of the bondage of the will is therefore not an isolated teaching belonging to one man or one denomination, but part of the historic confession of the Christian Church wherever the doctrines of grace have been faithfully maintained.

Chapter 30

Why The Bondage of the Will Still Matters Today

Nearly five centuries have passed since Martin Luther published The Bondage of the Will. Kingdoms have risen and fallen, empires have disappeared, and the world has been transformed in ways Luther himself could never have imagined. Yet the questions addressed in this remarkable work remain as vital today as they were during the Reformation.

The reason is simple. Human nature has not changed.

Men and women continue to ask the same fundamental questions that troubled Luther in his own day. Can a sinner save himself? Does God merely assist those who seek Him, or does He first awaken the dead heart? Is salvation ultimately determined by human choice, or does it rest entirely upon the sovereign grace of God? These are not merely academic questions. They lie at the very heart of the gospel itself.

Luther understood that the controversy was never simply about the freedom of the human will. It concerned the character of God, the authority of Holy Scripture, the nature of grace, and the glory of Christ in the salvation of sinners. If fallen man possesses the ability to turn himself to God, then grace becomes an aid rather than a necessity. But if man is spiritually dead, as Scripture declares, then salvation must be wholly the work of God from beginning to end.

For this reason, Luther regarded The Bondage of the Will as one of the most important books he ever wrote. Unlike many of his writings, which arose from immediate controversies, this work addressed what he believed to be the central issue of the Christian faith. Everything else depended upon the answer given to this question.

The centuries following the Reformation have done nothing to diminish the importance of this debate. The language may have changed, but the issues remain. Modern discussions concerning free will, human responsibility, divine sovereignty, election, predestination, regeneration, and conversion continue to reflect many of the same principles debated by Augustine and Pelagius, Erasmus and Luther.

Indeed, one of the great lessons of history is that theological controversies rarely disappear. They simply return under different names and in different forms. Every generation of Christians must therefore return to the Scriptures and ask once again what God has revealed concerning the condition of fallen man and the work of His saving grace.

This is why Luther continues to deserve careful reading. He refuses to allow philosophy, tradition, or human sentiment to determine doctrine. Instead, he continually appeals to the clear testimony of Holy Scripture. Whether one agrees with every argument or not, the reader is constantly driven back to the biblical text itself. In this respect, Luther provides an example worthy of imitation. His final authority is not reason but revelation.

At the same time, Luther reminds us that theology is never merely an intellectual exercise. Behind every doctrinal discussion stands the eternal destiny of men and women. The doctrines of grace are not abstract theories but glorious truths that magnify the mercy of God and humble the pride of man. They direct the sinner away from self-confidence and towards the all-sufficient work of Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this companion volume has never been to persuade readers to accept Luther's conclusions simply because they are Luther's. Great men are not the standard of truth. The only infallible rule of faith and practice is the written Word of God. Rather, the purpose has been to help readers understand Luther in his own historical setting, appreciate the theological issues he was addressing, and read The Bondage of the Will with greater understanding.

Every reader must ultimately examine Luther's arguments in the light of Scripture. The Bereans were commended because they searched the Scriptures daily to determine whether the things preached by the Apostle Paul were true (Acts 17:11). If even the teaching of an apostle was to be tested by the written Word, then the writings of every theologian, however gifted, must be examined by the same standard.

If this volume has encouraged readers to approach Luther with fairness, to appreciate the historical significance of the Reformation, and above all to search the Scriptures more carefully for themselves, then it will have fulfilled its purpose. For the goal has never been to produce admirers of Luther, but faithful students of the Word of God.

May every reader therefore follow Luther only insofar as he follows the teaching of Holy Scripture, and may the same God who graciously opened Luther's eyes continue to lead His people into the knowledge of His truth, for His glory alone.

"Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth."

— John 17:17